ヴァイオレット・エヴァーガーデン 上

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Violet Evergarden

vol.1

by Akatsuki Kana

Novel Updates

Translation Group: x0401x

Epub: Trollo WN/LN EPUB

Note from Author

I am writing this letter in a northern country. Snowy lands are places as quiet as the dead of the night. Since it’s so cold, I stay home often, and was raised into an adult that loves movies and fictional stories. May the images I’ve pictured in my mind navigate your sea of words.

—Akatsuki Kana

Prologue: “The Auto Memories Doll”

It had been a long time since such name was popularized.

The creator was the researcher of mechanical dolls, Professor Orlando. His wife, Molly, was a novelist, and it all started when she lost her sight. Once she had become blind, Molly was extremely depressed that she could no longer write novels – something she had done for the majority of her life – and had grown weaker as the days passed. Unable to bear seeing his wife in that state, Professor Orlando built the first Auto-Memories Doll. It was meant for registering everything said by a human voice – in other words, a machine that served as an ‘amanuensis’.

Although he had only meant to make one for his beloved wife, it later became well-known with the support of a great amount of people. Currently, Auto-Memories Dolls were being sold at a reasonably low price, and there were types that could be rented or borrowed.

Chapter 1: The Playwright and the Auto-Memories Doll

Roswell was a beautiful bucolic capital surrounded by greenery. The town was located at the base of a mountain, surrounded by several tall others. Its whole territory was something to be contemplated. However, amongst influential people, Roswell was known for its summerhouses – or, in other words, its holiday villas.

In spring, the mountains and rivers, overflowing with flowers, entertained people’s eyes. In summer, many sought the biggest waterfall, which was a touristic point, to learn about local history. In autumn, everyone’s hearts were struck by the rain of decaying leaves. In winter, the whole scenery was enveloped into silent tranquility. As the transition of the four seasons was very easily distinguishable, it was a land that had more than enough to

offer for pleasing those who visited during the change of periods for sightseeing.

Many villas had been built connected to the mountain-foot city, which consisted of wooden cottages painted in a variety of colors. From the smallest to the biggest lots, the cost of land in the area was quite a large sum, and therefore, having a villa be made there was a proof of wealth in itself.

The city was cramped with shops for tourists. On holidays, the main street interconnected to said shops would be crowded, pleasant tunes playing in the background. With such assortment, no one could make fun of the place, even with it being the countryside. People would usually build villas in the city for the sake of convenience, and anyone who built them anywhere else was viewed as an eccentric outcast.

The current season was an autumn of drifting clouds in a distant-looking sky. Away from the mountain foot, located near a lake that was not highly regarded as a sightseeing point, there was a single cottage. It was a traditional-style house with remarkable traits, as though to express it belonged to a profitable person. But as if it also belonged to an uncaring person, it was in poor condition, with an aspect of abandonment.

Beyond its arch-shaped gate of washed-out white paint was a garden filled with weeds and nameless flowers, as well as a rotting red brick wall that did not seem as if it would be repaired. Roof tiles cracked here and there, looking like they used to be perfectly aligned in the past but had been cruelly pared. Next to the house’s entrance was a swing covered in entangled ivies, apparently no longer movable. It was a clue that there used to be children around, and that there were not anymore.

The house’s proprietary was a middle-aged man named Oscar. With said name, he had maintained a career in the writing industry as a playwright. He was a redhead of many quirks who wore heavy-lensed, black-rimmed glasses. He was child-faced and a little bent forward, which made him look younger than he really was, and always wore a sweater, as he was sensitive to cold. A completely normal man that did not hint he could become a protagonist in any sort of story.

The house was not Oscar's villa; it had been built with the genuine desire to spend his life in that place. Not him alone, but also his wife and young daughter. It had enough space for the three of them, yet there was no one other than Oscar living there. The other two had long passed away.

The cause of Oscar's wife's death had been illness. Its name was too lengthy, to the point one would give up trying to pronounce it. Simply put, it was the rapid clotting of blood vessels and death by clogging. Moreover, it was hereditary, and his wife had inherited it from her father. As she had become an orphan due to the high mortality rate in her family, he had only come to find out the harsh truth regarding his wife, who had been lonely from her lack of relatives, after she was gone.

"She was scared that, if you'd known, you might have not wanted to marry a sick woman, so she kept it a secret."

The one who had told him so had been her best friend. At her funeral, from the moment he had received such revelation, one question had constantly echoed in Oscar's head.

"Why? Why? Why?"

If she had told him beforehand, no matter how much it cost, they could have searched for a cure together. They could have spent any amount of the extra money they had in their piled-up savings, regardless of the expenses.

It was glaringly obvious that Oscar's wife had not married him for gold-digging. He had first met her before becoming a playwright, and while their meetings took place in a library he frequently visited, the one who had first noticed her – the former librarian – had been Oscar himself.

——*I thought she was… a beautiful person. The corner of new books she was in charge of was always interesting. While I fell in love with those books, I also fell in love with her.*

"Why?" was repeated several hundreds of million times. Anything else had disappeared from his mind.

His wife's best friend was an auspicious person, and as he had lost spirit with the death of his wife, she energetically took care of him and his small daughter. She would prepare warm meals for Oscar, who would forget to eat all day if left alone, and braid the hair of the little girl who cried and mourned the absence of the mother that used to do so. Perhaps there had been a bit of one-sided love involved.

One time, when he was in bed with a high fever, the one who had taken his repeatedly vomiting daughter to the hospital had been her. The one who had found out first that the girl had the same disease as her mother had not been the father, but the mother's best friend.

What had happened afterwards had progressed slowly, but in Oscar's eyes, it could not have been faster. They had relied only on famous and unmatched doctors, unlike when his wife had gone through the same hardship. From one big hospital to the other, they bowed their heads to many people, asking for help and gathering information for testing new drugs.

Medicines and side effects were two sides of the same coin. His daughter would cry every time she took them. As he could not take his eyes off the suffering of his loved one, his nursing days gnawed his already corroded heart even more.

No matter what kind of new remedies they tried, his daughter's situation did not become better. In the end, out of resources, the medics gave up and declared her as incurable.

"I wonder if my wife is feeling forlorn after being beckoned to the underworld…" that and other equally foolish ponderings went through his mind over and over. *"Please don't take her with you."* he supplicated in front of her grave, but the dead do not have mouths to reply.

Oscar was mentally exhausted, but the one who broke down first had been his wife's best friend, who had followed them through the many hospitals until then. Overwrought from taking care of his unstable daughter, she gradually distanced herself from the hospital until, finally, Oscar and his daughter were truly on their own.

Due to a daily routine of several prescriptions, his daughter's cheeks, which had previously resembled rose petals over white milk, had become yellowish and hideously puny. Her hair that used to smell sweet and look like honey had quickly fallen off.

He could not bear to see her. It was truly a figure he could not endure staring at.

At last, Oscar had an argument with one of the doctors, so that his daughter would have to take nothing but painkillers. He did not wish for the rest of her short life to be engrossed in affliction.

From then on, there was a little bit of peace. Easygoing days. Watching his daughter's smile for the first time in a while. Remnants of their fortunate days had continued thereafter.

The weather had been wonderful the day she passed away – an autumn that brought out the color of everything around. The sky was bright. Red and yellow-dyed trees could be seen from the windows.

In the hospital's premises, there was a fountain that looked like an oasis, and on the water's surface, leaves coming from the surroundings quietly floated. Upon falling, they drifted and fluctuated on the water, accumulating as though they had been pulled by a magnet. His daughter had commented on how pretty they were.

"The yellow of the leaves mixing with the blue of the water is very pretty. Hey, could I walk on them without falling?"

Such a child-like idea. It was a evident that the leaves would soon lose to gravity and her weight and sink. Still, Oscar did not voice that.

"If you had an umbrella, you could use the wind and the chances of managing that would increase, huh?" he had jokingly answered, wishing to spoil that child who could not be saved, even if just slightly.

Hearing his response, his daughter had smiled with twinkling eyes.

“You’ll show it to me someday, right? In that lake close to our house, when the leaves that fall in autumn gather together on the surface.”

Someday.

Someday, she would show him.

Afterwards, his daughter, upon having a coughing fit, had suddenly passed.

As he had embraced her lifeless body, he realized how light it was. Even for a corpse that no longer had a soul, it had been too light. While sobbing, Oscar had asked himself if she had really ever been alive or if he had merely been having a long dream.

He had buried his daughter in the same cemetery as his wife, returning to the place where the three of them had once lived together and resuming his life quietly. Oscar had

enough

economic power to live without anything affecting him, as the scripts he had written were used everywhere, so the savings accumulated from his payments made it impossible for him to die from starvation.

After years of mourning for his daughter and wife, he was approached by a colleague of his former job, who had asked him if he could write a screenplay again. For Oscar, who only had his name left in the industry and his existence itself erased from it, a request from a theatre group that everyone admired was an honor.

Lazy, dissolute, grief-indulged days. Humans are creatures that easily become tired of being sad or happy, and cannot continue being one of either forever. That is their nature. Oscar had accepted the offer with an immediate feedback, deciding to hold onto a pen once more. However, it was from then that his problem started.

For the sake of escaping from the ugly reality, Oscar had started drinking. It had also served as a medicine for being able to have good dreams.

Thanks to the assistance of a doctor, he had been able to overcome the alcohol and drugs, but was left with a tremor in his hand. Whether he wrote on paper or with a typewriter, he simply could not properly progress. The desire to write, however, remained in his chest. All he had to do was find a means to put it into words.

As he asked for advice from the old work colleague that had made him the request, the latter had told him, “There’s something that could work. You should use an Auto-Memories Doll.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re so disconnected from the world… no, more like your reclusion from it is of a worrisome level. They’re famous. Nowadays, you can rent them for a relatively low price. That’s right, you should order one.”

“A doll… could help me?”

“They’re specialist amanuensis.”

Oscar had then decided to use the tool which name he had only just memorized. An ‘Auto-Memories Doll’. His encounter with her begun from there.

A woman climbed up the mountain road. Her soft, braided hair was held by a dark red ribbon, while her slim body was wrapped in a snow-white ribbon-tie dress. Her silk pleated skirt swayed neatly as she walked, the emerald brooch on her chest glittering in sparkles. The jacket she wore over the dress was of a contrasting Prussian blue. Her long leather boots, worn for practicality, were of a deep cocoa brown.

Holding a heavy-looking trolley bag, she made her way through Oscar’s house’s white arch gate. Right by the moment she stepped into the house’s front yard, a gust of autumn wind blew by noisily. Red, yellow and brown decayed leaves danced around her where she stood.

Perhaps because of the curtain of autumn leaves, her field of vision was momentarily clouded. The woman then firmly gripped the brooch on her

chest. She muttered something in a low voice – lower than the fluttering sound of the rain of leaves, melting into the air without anyone being able to hear it.

As the mischievous wind calmed down, the woman's cautious atmosphere was gone, and without any hesitation, she pressed the house's buzzer with a finger protected by a black glove. The groaning buzzer resounded like a scream from the depths of hell, and after a short while, the door was opened. The house's owner, the redhead Oscar, showed his face. He wore messy garments in front of the guest, as if he had either just woken up or not slept at all.

As Oscar looked at the woman, he was slightly perplexed. Was it because she had such a whimsical get-up? Or was it because she was too stunning? Whichever it was, he had to take a deep breath.

"Are you… the Auto-Memories Doll?"

"Precisely. I rush anywhere to provide service any a client might wish for. I am from the automated dolls service, Violet Evergarden." the blonde, blue-eyed woman who possessed a beauty that seemed to have come straight out of a fairytale answered in monotone, without putting on a fake smile.

The woman named Violet Evergarden was a figure as reticent and charming as an ordinary doll. Her blue irises, partially covered by golden locks, shone like the ocean, with cherry blossom pink-tinted cheeks over milky-white skin and glossy, lustrous rouge lips. A woman with a fairness akin to the full moon, not lacking in anything. Were it not for her blinking, she could easily become an artifact in some gallery.

Oscar had absolutely no knowledge regarding Auto-Memories Dolls, and so had asked his old work colleague to arrange one for him.

"She'll be sent there within a few days." was what he had been told, and after he did his waiting, he was visited by her.

——I was sure I was going to receive from the mailman a box containing a small, robotic-like doll. To think it would be an android so similar to a human… Just how much has civilization improved ever since I've secluded myself here?

Oscar kept himself in distant touch with the rest of the world. He did not read newspapers or magazines and rarely hung out with anyone. Other than friends of his, the only people he would have contact with were the cashier at the grocery store and the deliveryman that occasionally brought him packages.

He soon regretted not looking for information and arranging everything himself. To have something that resembled a person in a house once meant for three felt extremely incongruous and somehow brought back a bitter aftertaste.

——It feels like I'm doing something terrible to my family…

Without trying to understand Oscar's thinking, Violet sat on the expansive couch of the living room she had been directed to. Upon being offered black tea, she drank all of it neatly, which seemed to point that the current machines had developed splendidly.

"What happens to the black tea you drank?"

Feeling herself being questioned, Violet tilted her head a little. "It will eventually be discharged from my body… and return to the earth?" she replied. It was a very machine doll-like answer.

"Honestly… I'm shocked. Hum, you're a bit different… from what I had imagined."

Violet examined her own appearance with a glance, and then looked back at Oscar, who stared at her without sitting on the adjacent chair.

"Would there have been any extra credits in case I was in accordance with your hopes?"

“No… it’s not exactly ‘hopes’…”

“If Master would not mind waiting, I could ask the Company to send another doll.”

“That’s not what I meant… no, forget it. As long as you can work, it’s fine. You don’t seem like the loud type.”

“If you wish, I could also breathe more quietly.”

“You don’t have… to go that far.”

“I have come here to be Master’s assistant. I shall work to please you so that I will not stain the name of Auto-Memories Dolls. I do not mind whether the tools I have at my disposition are pen and paper or a typewriter. Please use me as you will.”

As she said so with her huge, gem-like blue orbs staring at him intensely, Oscar’s heart raced a little, and he nodded with an “okay”.

The period she had been rented for was two weeks. In that meantime, they had to finish a story no matter what. Oscar renewed his will, taking her to his study and planning to start working immediately. Yet, as things turned out, what Violet ended up doing first was not writing, but cleaning up the room.

The study that was also a bedroom had Oscar’s previously worn clothes and a pan with leftovers from his last meal all over the floor in a disastrous fashion. Bluntly put, there had been no space for even one foot to step inside.

Violet gazed at him with her big pupils. “You called me here with the place in this condition?”, her eyes seemed to say.

“I’m sorry…”

Clearly, it was not a room someone would work in. Ever since he had become alone, he stopped using the living room, which was why it was

still clean, but the bedroom he frequently entered and exited, as well as the kitchen and the bathroom, were in an atrocious state.

Oscar was glad that Violet was a mechanical doll. Her body age seemed to be from someone in her 10's to her mid-20's; he did not wish to show something so embarrassing to a real woman that young. Even though he was getting old, for a man, it was just deplorable.

"Master, I am an amanuensis, not a maid." she said while contradictorily pulling out of her bag a white frilly apron, willingly proceeding to tidy everything up.

The first day was over just like that.

On the second day, the two of them sat in the study and started their work. Oscar lay on his bed while Violet sat on a chair and used the typewriter on the desk.

"She… said," as Oscar dictated, she silently wrote down each letter with terrifying speed in blind touch. He observed, thoroughly surprised. "Pretty… fast, huh."

Upon being complimented, Violet removed one of the black gloves that went up to her sleeves and showed one of her arms. It was metallic. The fingers seemed to be even stiffer and more robotic-like than the other parts.

"I am employed by an agency that sells practicality. These are the standards of Esterk Company, so my levels of endurance are high, and it's possible to make moves and use a level of physical force that a human body normally would not be able to, which is very fascinating. I can register any word Master says without omissions."

"Is that so? Ah, hey, you don't have to write what I just said, only the words meant for the script."

Oscar continued to dictate. In the process, they took many breaks, but things went well for the first day. After all, the story's concept had only

been stored within him, and he had not been able to record it anywhere.

As Oscar spoke, he realized that Violet was great as a story listener and amanuensis. She had given off an impression of serenity from the start, and during work, that was even more apparent. Even though he had not requested it, he really could not hear her breathing, only the clacking of the typewriter. When he averted his eyes, he had the impression the typewriter was typing all by itself. Whenever he asked until what point she had written, she would read it to him, her tempered voice and good reciting being something interesting to listen to. With her as narrator, anything sounded like a solemn fictional story.

——*I see, of course these would become popular.*

Oscar was able to keenly witness the greatness of Auto-Memories Dolls. However, although things had gone smoothly until the third day, from the fourth day on, there was a period of writer's block. It was something common amongst writers; times when the contents to be written down were already thought of, but the right words to put them in were not.

From his many years of experience, Oscar had a method to cope with not being able to write. That was to avoid writing. He had the fact that nothing he forced himself to write would come off good enough internalized within himself. Therefore, he felt bad for Violet, but had to leave her in waiting. For the sake of not making her sit idly, he asked her do the cleaning, laundry and cooking. Naturally, she was powered by the spontaneous disposition of a hardworker.

It had been a long time since he had eaten a steamy warm meal made by someone else. He did order from delivery services and ate out, but the meals he had cooked for himself due to being busy from work were different from those.

Omelet rice with an egg coat that melted creamily into his mouth. A tofu hamburger recipe from the East. A top-notch pilaf of colorful vegetables over rice mixed in a spicy sauce. A gratin with seafood that was hard to find in a land surrounded by mountains. As side dishes, there would

always be salads and soups that he would always ask what had been made of. He was a little moved by all of that.

While Oscar ate, Violet only watched without tasting anything. She would not budge as mealtime went on, claiming she would eat later. It was confirmed that she could ingest liquids, but it could be that she could not eat anything solid. If that was so, what if she drank oil while he was not looking? As he tried to picture it, a surreal image came to his mind.

——*There would still be no problem… if we ate together.* He thought wishfully, without saying it aloud.

She was completely different from his wife, but something about the silhouette of her back as she cooked brought a familiar feeling. As he observed her, for some reason, he was assaulted by excessive sadness and the corners of his eyes felt hot. With that, he came to understand awfully well how it was to let an outsider into his routine.

——*Meaning… the lifestyle I have right now is really lonely.*

The elation of seeing Violet come back home from an errand. The relief of knowing he was not alone as he felt himself falling asleep at night. The fact that she would be there when he opened his eyes again, even without doing anything. All of it made Oscar aware of how much of a solitary person he was.

He had no monetary or economic troubles in his life. However, that was nothing more than a psychological shield to sugarcoat reality and prevent his heart from hardening even more. It was not guaranteed to cure any wounds. Having someone whom he knew nothing of other than her temperament so close and be there beside him the same way he had left her as he woke up pierced through the once shut-off heart of Oscar, who had been alone for so long.

Violet coming into his life had been like ripples on water. A small change in a still lake. The only things caught in such flow were insignificant pebbles, but for a life as tasteless as his, it had been like a great transformation for a wind-less lake.

Was it a good or bad change? If he were to decide, he would say it had been good. At least, the tears overflowing from the sorrow he felt when she was around were much warmer than any he had shed so far.

After three more days of his time with Violet went by, Oscar got on his feet again. What he had gained inspiration for had been a specific scene.

The story Oscar was having Violet write was about the adventures of a lone girl. Said girl, who had left home, visited many lands, came in contact with many people and witnessed many occurrences, thus growing up. The girl's motif was his diseased daughter.

At the end of it all, the girl would return to the home she had parted from. Her father had awaited her there, and could not tell if it was really her, as she had changed too much. The sad girl begged him to remember, reminding him of a promise they had exchanged in the past – to try crossing the lake close to their house by walking on the decayed leaves that fell on the water.

"Humans can't walk on water."

"I just want the image. I'll make the girl be assisted by the blessing she had earned from a water spirit in the middle of her adventure."

"Even so, I'm not cut for this. The girl from the story is vivacious and endearingly innocent. That's unlike everything I am." the Auto-Memories Doll argued.

Oscar had Violet put on clothes that imitated his main character and requested her to play around a little at the lakeshore. He had already made her do cleaning, laundry and other house chores, and on top of it, asked for such a favor. It was as if she was a factotum.

Even as Violet was a percipient professional woman, she mused in surprise, "What a troublesome person…"

“Your hair color… may be a little different, but it’s blond, just like my daughter was. If you put on a one-piece, surely…”

“Master, I am but an amanuensis. An Auto-Memories Doll. I am not your wife or concubine. Nor can I become a replacement.”

“I-I know that. I wouldn’t have that kind of interest in a girl like you. It’s just… your appearance… if my daughter were alive, I think… she’d have grown into someone sort of like you.”

Violet’s firm rejection crumbled at that. “I really did think you were being too stubborn… so your young lady passed away?” she bit her lip lightly. Her face seemed to show that her conscience was conflicted.

During these few days, Oscar had become able to understand one thing about her. That was how Violet would stick to what was considered ‘righteous’ when torn up between good or bad things.

“I’m an Auto-Memories Doll… I want to grant my clients’ wishes… but this one violates my work regulations…”

She behaved as if she was inwardly wrestling with herself, and although Oscar felt bad for it, he tried one last time, “If you could build the image of the girl as a grown-up, coming back home and ready to fulfill her promise, my will to write will soon be revived. It’s true. If you want a reward, I can give you anything. I can pay double your original price. This story is really precious to me. I want to finish writing it, and make it my life’s milestone. Please.”

“But… I… am not a dress-up doll…”

“Then I won’t take photos or anything of the sort.”

“You had intended to?”

“I’ll burn it into my memory, and write the story with just that. Please.”

Violet thought it over a little more with a sullen face after that, and wound up complying, losing to Oscar’s persistence. She could be the type that

became weak when pressured.

Oscar then left behind his life of confinement, went out on his own and bought fancy clothes and an umbrella for Violet. The outfit was a white lace blouse with a ribbon belt over a blue one-piece. The umbrella was cyan and white-stripped, abundant in frills. It seemed to pique Violet's interest as she spun it around after repeatedly opening and closing it.

"Is the umbrella weird?"

"It's my first time seeing such a cute umbrella."

"Aren't you wearing cute clothes yourself? Do they not match your tastes?"

"We wear what the superiors of the company suggest us to. I myself don't visit fashion stores very often."

It was like a child dressing up as her mother told her.

——*It could be… that she's far younger than even she herself thinks.*

Thinking like that, she faintly resembled a little girl, regardless of her adult-like appearance. While Violet still had not changed her mind, once Oscar was done shopping, he wasted no time in asking her to get changed.

It was late afternoon, a bit cloudy outside. It did not seem like it would rain, but the atmosphere implied so. The chilly air that brought the feeling that autumn was coming was not yet cold enough to prod into one's skin.

Oscar was the one to go out first. He sat on a wooden chair in the vicinity of the lake, smoking a pipe. Because he had somewhat taken care of himself and not smoked since she had arrived, the feeling of the smoke steeping through his belly was diffused.

A few minutes of blown smoke floating in the air ensued. Then, the front door with

increasingly worse rattling

was opened with a creaking sound.

“I apologize for the wait.”

He turned only his head at the dispassionate voice. “You…”

“…didn’t make me wait much” was what he was going to say, but the words did not come out as his breath had stopped for a second. He swallowed back a gasp, as dumfounded as the first time he had seen Violet.

She was too gorgeous with her hair down – a beauty that stole the moment of appreciation of everything else. The hair that had once been braided was leniently spread and slightly curled at the ends. It was fairly longer than he had imagined. And, most important of all…

——*If… my daughter had been able to grow up… she’d be like this.*

Had she come to show him her dressed-up form? As he wondered about that, warmth welled in his chest.

“Master, is the image of me wearing the clothes you gave me good enough?” In the midst of the world of autumn colors, the girl of inhuman beauty grabbed her skirt and attempted swirling around once. “With this, I just have to model as though I were crossing that lake, right? Eh, but Master, is that really the kind of setting you wanted to write? Rather than merely walking around like this, even if just for a few seconds, it would be better if I actually did run across the lake. Master, leave it to me. I’m specialized in physical activities, and although it’s only for a little, I can follow your expectations.” Violet explained as expressionless and indifferently as ever, not paying any mind to Oscar, who was overcome with too many emotions at the same time and could not come up with any reply other than ‘aah’s and ‘uuh’s.

The one standing in front of him was the total opposite of his daughter. Despite possessing the same golden hair, her pupils lacked that sweet glow.

Violet leaned the closed umbrella against her shoulder while gripping it tightly. She stood at a broad distance from the lake, staring at it as though examining the water surface. Dyed in the withering colors of autumn, fallen leaves were afloat on it.

The wind was unstable, blowing and stopping, blowing and stopping. Oscar worriedly observed her licking one of her mechanic fingers with the tip of her tongue, confirming said wind's direction. As she steadily stepped backwards into the ground, she glanced at Oscar with a tiny smile.

"Worry not. Everything… shall be as Master wishes." after reassuring with a voice that had a sweet ring to it, Violet leaped widely. Although she had been far from him, in a second, she flew past Oscar's eyes. Such speed was like the wind itself.

Before stepping onto the lake, the ever-so-fast Auto-Memories Doll firmly kicked the earth. The impact was strong enough to shake the soil. Her tough legs made real the possibility of jumping a frightening height. It looked as though she was about to climb the stairway to heaven. Oscar's mouth was agape at the superhuman action.

From then on, everything seemed to have happened in slow motion. Reaching the critical point, Violet raised the umbrella she had taken with her and opened it flashily. It was like a blooming flower. The umbrella's frills swayed beautifully and, as if predicting the perfect timing, the wind pushed her feet forward. Her skirt and umbrella bulged softly in the air, her petticoat sticking out. Her long knit-up boots gently stepped onto the decayed leaves floating about the water surface.

That one moment. That one second. That one picture. The scene was engraved into Oscar's memory

as clearly as a photograph. A girl with a swinging umbrella and a fluttering skirt, stepping onto the surface of a lake, just like a sorceress.

The words of his daughter from the day her heartbeats had stopped came back to him.

“Someday…”

“You’ll show it to me someday, right? In that lake close to our house, when the leaves that fall in autumn gather together on the water surface.”

“Someday… I’ll show it to you someday, Dad.”

A voice… the voice from that girl which he had ended up forgetting reverberated in his mind.

——You had no idea, did you? I wanted to continue being called by you, a hundred more times even.

“You’ll show it to me someday, right?”

“Dad.” a lisp, sweet voice said, *“I’ll show it to you someday, Dad.”*

——Your voice was more comfortable to hear than anyone else’s.

“I’ll show it to you someday.”

——Ah, that’s right. You, with that voice, would innocently entertain me. You had said that, had you not? We made a promise. I had forgotten. I had forgotten it all. For a long time, I couldn’t bring myself to remember you properly, so I’m glad we met again. Even as an illusion, I’m glad I met you. My gracious little lady. Mine, mine. My treasure shared with my most precious person. I knew… that it definitely couldn’t be fulfilled. Yet we still promised it. That promise, your death… they destroyed me, while pushing me on to keep living until now. And up to this day, I kept dragging myself through life. I lived messily, looking for vestiges of you. I had resented it, but this moment… the moment where someone who isn’t you resembled you to me… was an instant, a chance meeting, an encounter, and an embrace. I had wanted to see it, thinking it would make me want to live for real again. You, whose name I can’t even whisper out of sadness. I had… wanted to see your gracious self once again, all this time. The last family member I had left. Always, always… I had constantly wanted to see you. I loved you.

He was so happy he actually wanted to smile, and yet…

“Fu… uh… uh…”

…only sobs came out. Tears flowed as though to start bringing Oscar’s frozen time back to action.

“Aah… man…”

He could hear the tic-tac of a clock. It was the sound of his formerly frigid heart beating.

“I really, really…”

As he covered his face with his hands, he realized how unpleasantly creased they had become. Just for how long had his time stopped ever since those two had passed away?

“…wanted you… to not… have died…” his face was distorted as he murmured with a tearful voice, “I had wanted you to live… live and… grow up… a lot…”

——*…and show me how beautiful you would have become. I had wanted to see you like that. And after being able to see you in that form, I wanted to have died before you. Before you, after having been taken care of by you – I had wanted to die like this. Not have… to take care… of you instead. Not like that.*

“I want to see you…”

Oscar’s tears leaked from his eyes down his cheeks and dripped onto the ground. The sound of Violet stepping onto the lake echoed through his world of weeping. The moment of gleam was gone, and his daughter’s voice, which he had finally remembered, was soon forgotten again. The illusion of a smiling face, too, disappeared like soap bubbles.

Oscar blocked his field of vision not only with his hands, but also with his eyes closed. He rejected the world where she no longer belonged in.

——*Ah, it would be fine if I died right now. No matter how much time I spend mourning, they won’t return. Heart, breathing, please stop. Ever*

since my wife and daughter died, I've become as good as dead. That's why, now… right now, in this very second… I want to drop dead onto the earth as if I had been shot down. Just like flowers, which can't continue to breathe if their petals fall off.

He implored, but even if he made that wish several hundreds of million times, nothing would change. He, who had already wished it these several hundreds of million times, knew it very well.

——*Let me die, let me die, let me die. If the only other option is living in loneliness, let me be dead with them.*

As much as he begged, nothing of it came true. Nothing came true, however…

"Master!"

In the world he neglected, he could hear the voice of a thing whose time was as stagnant as his own. With ragged breaths, it made its way towards him.

——*I'm… alive.*

He was still living. And, while at it, he was struggling to disappear, just as his late loved ones had. It was not a prayer that would be answered by being mustered out, but with a darkness-engulfed field of vision, where no sunlight could penetrate, he supplicated anyways.

"God, please…"

——*If I'm not to die yet, at least may my daughter be happy within that story. May my daughter be satisfied with it. And by my side. May she be… by my side forever. Even if only inside a tale. Even as an imaginary girl. Be by my side.*

He could not help but wish so. After all, his life would go on.

In front of Oscar, who cried without caring about his age, Violet arrived, drenched in lake water. Water droplets dripped from her messy clothes,

which were now ruined. Yet she had on the most joyful expression, which could even be considered a smile, that she had ever showed until then.

“Did you see? I was able to walk three steps.”

Without revealing that he had become unable to see through the tears, Oscar answered while inhaling with a runny nose, “Hm, I did. Thank you, Violet Evergarden.” he put his gratitude and respect into his words.

——*Thank you for making it true. Thank you. It really was like a miracle.*

As he said he did not think a God existed, but if it did, it was definitely her, Violet merely responded, “I am an Auto-Memories Doll, Master,” without denying nor confirming God’s existence.

Afterwards, Oscar warmed up a bath for Violet, who was utterly soaked.

She did not show up for meals, but she did use the bathroom every day and supposedly rested in the room that had been given to her. She was a very human-like mechanic doll.

——*Really, civilization is amazing nowadays. The development of science is remarkable.*

Not even while being a machine girl could she be left with wet clothes. As a change was necessary, she lay a bathrobe around her supposedly perfect body and headed for the bathroom. It had been a while since anyone other than Oscar had regularly used it, so in a lapse of memory, he entered it without knocking and ended up seeing her while she had not yet put anything on.

“Ah, I’m sor… ry… eh?”

He swallowed his breath due to perplexity.

“EEEH?!”

What was reflected in Oscar’s eyes was a sight more bewitchingly beautiful than any naked woman. Dripping golden hair. Beautiful blue orbs

of a deepness that would not soften even within a painting and the finely-shaped lips just below them. A flesh body with a slender neck, an outstanding collarbone, plump breasts, and feminine curves.

Her artificial arms consisted of metal parts from the shoulders to the fingertips. But it was only them. Despite the many scratches, other than the arms, the rest was surprisingly real skin. With that delicate body, she did not seem at all like a mechanical doll, but a relatively normal human being.

With everything he had believed in until then being mantled over by the shocking revelation, Oscar attempted to confirm what he was seeing many times over.

“Master.” Violet called with a voice that seemed to be judging him as he continued to ogle in astonishment.

“UAAAAAAH! UAAAAAH! UAAAAAHAAAAAH!”

Part of the outcome of that incident was Oscar’s screaming. The other was him half-crying while going beet-red, after having yelled on top of his lungs, frantically inquiring, “Are you human, after all?!”

Wrapping a towel around herself, Violet plainly commented, “Master is, truly, a troublesome person.” Her cheeks were rose-dusted as she muttered, her face a little lowered.

‘Auto-Memories Doll’. It had been a long time since such name was popularized.

The creator was the researcher of mechanical dolls, Professor Orlando. His wife, Molly, was a novelist, and it all started when she lost her sight. Once she had become blind, Molly was extremely depressed that she could not write novels – something she had done for the majority of her life – and had grown weaker as the days passed. Unable to bear seeing his wife in that state, Professor Orlando built the first Auto-Memories Doll. It was meant for registering everything said by a human voice – in other words, a machine that served as an ‘amanuensis’.

After that, some of Molly's works won worldwide literary prizes, and Professor Orlando's invention became known as necessary for the course of history. Although he had only meant to make one for his beloved wife, it later became well-known with the support of a great amount of people. Currently, Auto-Memories Dolls were sold at a reasonably low price, and there were types that could be rented or borrowed. However, the latters were only amanuensis that possessed similar characteristics to Auto-Memories Dolls, and were referred to with the same name.

After having bid goodbye to Violet, Oscar came to learn through his friend that she was famous in the industry. As the friend found out Oscar had at first mistaken her for an actual Auto-Memories Doll, he let out an obnoxious, amused laugh. "You sure live under a rock! Did you really think a machine so pretty could exist?"

"It's because you said she was a mechanical doll…"

"The technology of the present human civilization hasn't reached that level yet. There are actual mechanical dolls, though. Some cute ones. But I just… thought she'd be a good medicine for someone like you, a shut-in who doesn't interact with people. That girl… doesn't talk much, but she has the power to restore people. It served the purpose, right?"

"Yeah."

She was indeed quiet, but, yes, she was a really good girl.

"They're no match for Violet Evergarden, but next time, for you to have a permanent assistant, I'll send you an amanuensis that isn't half-human."

In the end, a package was delivered to Oscar's house. It contained a small doll, completely different from Violet Evergarden. It was a mechanical doll meant for recording everything said by him with his typewriter, and would usually be sitting on his desk, clad in a lovely dress.

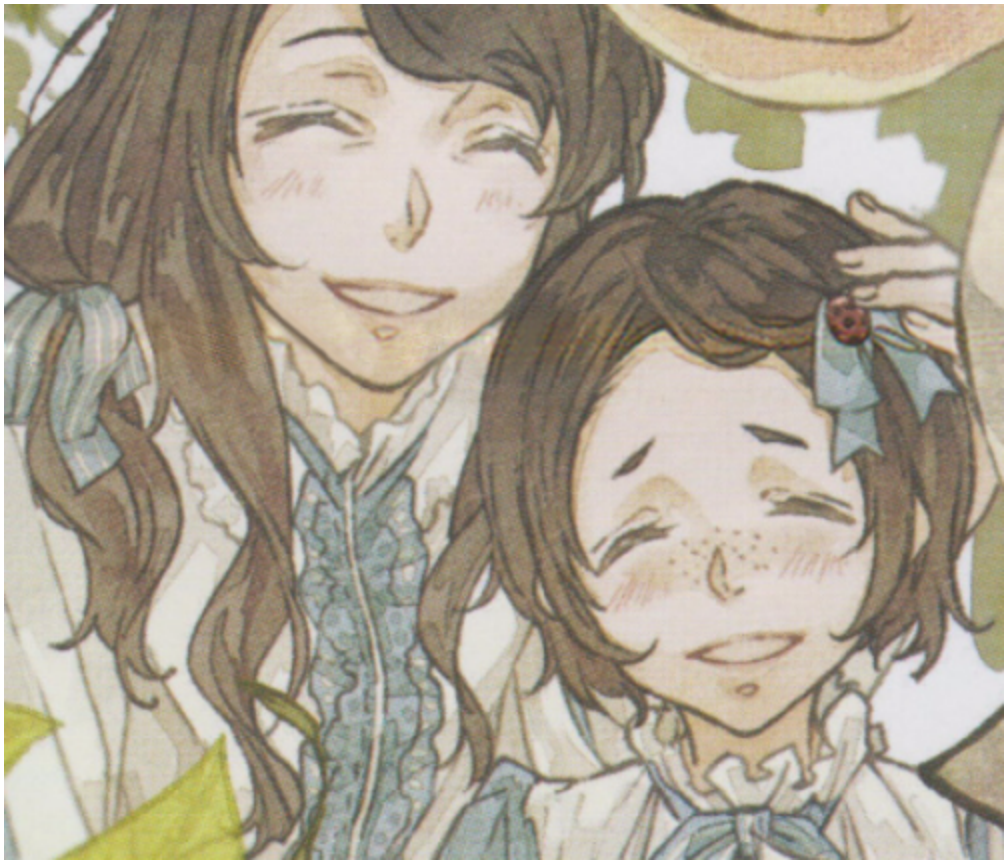
——*I see. Definitely, this is extraordinary.*

“But, it can’t compare to her…” Oscar smiled wryly, looking at the room he had lent to the girl who was no longer around. If he said he was lonely, he knew exactly how she would reply.

“Master is… such a troublesome person.” a sweet voice echoed. Its owner spoke expressionlessly, with only the corners of her lips curling upwards a little bit.

Even without her there, he had a feeling he could hear it.

Chapter 2: The Girl and the Auto-Memories Doll



I… remember.

That a young woman had come.

Sitting there, quietly, she would write letters.

I… remember.

The figures of that person… and of my kindly smiling mother.

That sight… surely…

I would not forget even if I died.

Amanuensis is a profession that has existed since ancient times. It had once come to a point of decay due to the popularization of Auto-Memories Dolls, yet professions that have a long history are loved and protected by no short amount of people. The increase in number of amanuensis machine dolls was precisely what caused nostalgic hobbyists to claim that old-fashioned professions were better off keeping their charm.

The mother of Ann Magnolia was one of those people with fascinatingly old-fashioned taste. With her wavy dark hair, freckles and slender body, Ann's mother was just like Ann herself in looks and had come from a wealthy household. She was raised as an elite woman, got married and, even after aging, something about her still resembled a "young lady". The gentle smile she wore whenever letting out a high-pitched laughter was indescribable to whomever saw it. Looking back at how her mother was, even now, Ann thought she was like a little girl. She was vigorous in spite of being a clumsy person, and whenever she would enthusiastically assert, "I want to try this out!", Ann would retort with, "My, my, again?".

She was fond of boat rides and dog races, as well as oriental flower arrangements that could be found in quilt embroidery. She was a person who loved learning and had a hobbyist side to her, and if she went to the theaters, it was definitely to watch romance plays. She was keen on laces and ribbons, her dresses and one-pieces mostly similar to those of princesses from fairytales. She imposed them on her daughter too, as she fancied parent-children matching outfits. Ann had sometimes wondered what was up with her mother for wearing ribbons at her age, but never once said it aloud.

Ann treasured her mother more than anyone in the world – even more than her own existence. Although she was a young child, she had believed to be the only one that could protect her mother, who was not a strong person by any means. She loved her mother that blindly.

Around the time when her mother became ill and the date of her passing was approaching, Ann had her first meeting with Auto-Memories Dolls. Even though she had countless memories with her mother, the ones Ann

recalled were always about the days they had welcomed a mysterious visitor.

“It” had showed up on a very blue day. The road was bathed with abundant sunrays of a beautiful spring. Next to it, the flowers that had started to bloom from within the thaw were swayed by the feeble wind, their tips shaking. From her home’s garden, Ann was observing the way “it” walked.

Ann’s mother had inherited the top left side of an old but stylish western-architecture building from her family. With its white walls and blue roof tiles, surrounded by huge birch trees, the place was like an illustration out of a children’s book. The residence was peripheral, having been built secluded and quite far from their prospering town. Even if one were to search in every direction, no neighboring houses could be found there. That was why, were there ever any guests coming, they would easily be sighted through the windows.

“What… is that?”

Clad in a smock one-piece that had a large cyan-stripped ribbon collar, Ann looked a bit ordinary yet lovely. It almost seemed like her dark brown eyes would jump out of her head, given how they were wide open. Ann then peeled her pupils off “it”, which walked towards her direction under the sunlight, and, with her flowery enamel shoes, hurried out of the garden and back into her house. She passed the huge front entrance, climbed the spiral staircase filled with family portraits and burst open a door decorated with a lease made of pink roses.

“Mom!”

While her daughter sucked in ragged breaths, the mother reprehended, raising her body a little on her bed, “Ann, don’t I always tell you that you must knock before entering someone’s room? Also, you should ask for permission.”

Upon being lectured, Ann let out an annoyed “muh” in her head, but bowed deeply in apology regardless, her hands clasped together in front of her skirt’s hem. One might wonder if that action was what could be called

her “young lady side”. Truth be told, Ann was just a small child. It had been no longer than seven years ever since she was born. Her limbs and face still appeared soft.

“Mom, excuse me.”

“Very well. Then, what is it? Did you find some odd bug outside again? Don’t show it to Mom, okay?”

“It’s not a bug! It’s a walking doll! Well, it actually was really big for a doll, and it looked like one of those bisque dolls from that photo collection you like, Mom.” With her limited vocabulary, Ann spoke as though having a coughing fit. Her mother clicked her tongue at that with a “tsk, tsk”.

“You mean a ‘young female doll’, right?”

“Come on, Mom!”

“You’re a daughter of the Magnolia family, so your wording should be more graceful. Okay, one more time.”

Puffing her cheeks, Ann reluctantly fixed her manner of speech, “A young female doll was walking!”

“My, is that so?”

“Only cars pass by our house all the time, right? If she’s on foot, it means she got off at the nearby railroad operation terminal. People who come from that terminal are bound to be our visitors, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I mean, there’s never anything happening around here! It must mean that woman will be coming to this place!” Ann added, “I… have a feeling that this isn’t a good thing.”

“So we’re playing detective today, huh?” In contrast with the frantic Ann, the mother concluded leisurely.

“I’m not playing around! Hey, let’s close all doors and windows… let’s make it so that this doll… this young woman doll… won’t come inside! It’s alright, I’ll protect Mom.”

The mother gave Ann, who determinedly snuffled through her nose, a strained smile. She probably thought that was just a child spouting nonsense. Even so, at the very least, she decided to go along with the game, getting up in a lethargic fashion. Her peach-colored negligee’s hem dragging along the floor, she stood next to the window. Under the natural light, the silhouette of her slim body could be seen under the fabric.

“My, isn’t that an Auto-Memories Doll? Come to think of it, she was supposed to arrive today!”

“What’s an ‘Auto-Memories Doll’…?”

“I’ll explain later, Ann. Help me get changed!”

A few minutes thereafter, the mother went to her daughter to ready her with the stylishness that was demanded from the Magnolia family. Ann did not change her clothes, but had a ribbon that matched the color of her smock one-piece placed on her head. Her mother, on the other hand, wore an ivory-colored dress with double-layered lace frills, as well as a light yellow shawl over her shoulders and rose-shaped earrings. She sprayed a perfume made of thirty different types of flowers in the air and spun around, wrapping the fragrance around her.

“Mom, are you excited?”

“Even more than if I were to meet a foreign prince.”

That was not a joke. The get-up her mother had chosen was the kind that she would only put on for big occasions. Watching her like that caused Ann to fidget. Such fidgeting was not out of delight.

——*I don’t like this… it would have been fine if there weren’t any guests coming…*

Children normally look forward to visitors while feeling a bit nervous, but Ann was different. That was because, from the moment she had become aware of the things around her, Ann deducted that any visitors who were coming for her innocent mother would fool her to get to her money. Her mother was a carefree person and visits always made her happy, so she was quick to trust anyone. Ann loved her mother, but her poor monetary management abilities and scarce sense of danger were troublesome.

Not even a person who had the looks of a doll could be guaranteed to not be after the possession of their residence. But what Ann felt more wary of than that was how she could tell with just a glance that the woman's appearance resonated with her mother's taste. To Ann, it was nothing but unpleasant for her mother to be invested in anyone other than her.

Since her mother had said, "I want to hurry and meet her!" and not listened to Ann, the two of them had come outside to greet the guest – something they had not done in a long while. Ann assisted her mother, who was out of breath just from descending the stairs, as they walked out, into a world overflowing with sunlight.

The whiteness from the pale skin of her mother, who usually only moved around inside the mansion, stood out too much.

——*Mom is… somewhat smaller than she used to be.*

Ann could not clearly see her mother's face in the excess of brightness, but felt that her wrinkles had increased. She squeezed her chest tightly. No one could stop death from reaching out for a sickly hand.

Ann was a young child, but she was the Magnolia family's sole successor after her mother. She had already been told by doctors that her mother's life would be short. She had also been told to be prepared. God did not take easy even on seven-year-olds.

——*If that's the case, I want Mom all to myself until the very end.*

If her time was running out, Ann wanted her to use it all for herself. Into the world of the girl who had such a mindset, a stranger intruded.

“Excuse me.” Something even more radiant emerged from the sun-bathed green road.

As soon as Ann saw “it”, her bad feeling was confirmed.

——*Aah, here’s the one that will steal Mom from me.*

Why did she have that thought? Upon looking at “it”, she could say that had been her intuition talking.

“It” was a bewitchingly beautiful doll. Golden hair shining as though she had been born out of moonlight. Blue orbs that glowed like gems. Bright rouge-colored lips so plump as to seem like they had been pressed hard. A Prussian blue jacket under a ribbon-tie snow white dress that bore a mismatched emerald brooch. Cocoa brown knitted boots that stepped steadily onto the ground. Placing the frilly, white and cyan-striped umbrella and bag that she held onto the grass, “it” displayed an etiquette much more elegant than Ann in front of the two.

“Pleased to meet you. I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might need. I’m the Auto-Memories Doll Violet Evergarden.”

Its voice, just as exquisite as its appearance, resounded in their ears. After overcoming her shock from being overwhelmed by its beauty, Ann looked at her mother, who was at ease next to her. Expression painted like a small girl that had just fallen in love, stars twinkled in her eyes out of amazement.

——*And, as expected, that’s no good.*

Ann thought of the beautiful guest as someone bound to steal her mother away from her.

Violet Evergarden was an Auto-Memories Doll who worked in the automated writing business. Ann questioned her mother as to why she had hired someone like that.

“I want to write letters to someone, but they’d take too long, so I wanted her to write in my stead.” Her mother had laughed. Indeed, she lately was relying on her maids even for bathing. Writing for an extended period would certainly be too hard for her.

“But, why that person…?”

“She’s pretty, isn’t she?”

“She is, but…”

“She’s a celebrity in the industry. The fact that she’s so pretty and doll-like is one of the reasons of her fame, but she’s also said to do really a good job! Moreover, having a woman write letters for me while it’s just the two of us, and having to recite it to her out loud… you don’t need to be a man for this to make you shudder!”

Her mother valued the beautiful, so Ann was convinced that was the main motive why the young woman had been the chosen one.

“If it’s just letters… I could be the one to write them.”

At Ann’s statement, her mother laughed nervously. “Ann still can’t possibly write difficult words. Besides… this are letters that I can’t have you write.” With that last sentence, it was clear who the one doing the writing would be.

——*Surely, she intends to write for Dad, huh…*

Ann’s father was, simply put, a family abandoner. He never stayed home, albeit not working that much, prospering in taking over the family’s main business. Apparently, her mother had married him out of love, but Ann did not believe that at all. Not once did he visit her mother after she had become sick, and when they thought he was going to come back after a while, he had actually only stopped by to take vases and paintings from the house and sell them, as he was a pitiful man who took refuge in gambling and alcohol.

It seemed he had been a family heir with a promising future in the past. But a few years after getting married, his side of the family had faced minor commercial issues and crumbled down, so the finances had become dependent of the Magnolias. And, from what she had heard, it appeared that the reason behind those minor commercial issues had been her father himself.

Ann swallowed down all the circumstances and despised her father. Even if he had fallen once due to business failure, should he not have continued to do his best? Not only did he not do so, he also turned a blind eye to her mother's illness and necessities, and kept running away. That was why Ann's expression would become distorted just by hearing the word "father" coming out of her mother's mouth.

"Making this kind of face again… it's a waste of your cute features."

The creasing between Ann's eyebrows was stretched out by a massaging thumb. Her mother seemed to lament that she hated her father. It seemed her affection for him remained even while being treated so terribly.

"Don't think severely of your father. Bad things don't last. This is just what he wishes to do for the moment. He's lived his whole life seriously. It's true. Although our paths are slightly different, if we wait, he will properly return to us someday."

Ann knew that such days would not come. Even if they did, she had no intention to warmly welcome them. If things turned out the way her unwittingly wavering mother said they would, the fact he did not come see his wife even as she had become terminally ill and repeatedly found herself hospitalized, was not an escapism from reality but an act of love.

He most likely knew that she did not have much time left.

——*It's fine without Dad around.*

It was as if he was not there from the start. For Ann, her mother was the only one who classified in the word "family". And those who saddened her mother were enemies to her, even if one of them was her own father.

Anyone who would steal her time with her mother, too. And if that applied to the Auto-Memories Doll who had come as per her mother's request, she would also be an enemy.

——*Mom is mine.*

Anything that could destroy hers and her mother's world was marked by Ann as a foe.

The mother and Violet started the process of writing the letters while seated at a table on an antique white bench under an umbrella, which had been placed in the garden. Their contract period was of one week. It seemed the mother really did intend to make Violet write incredibly long letters.

Perhaps they were addressed at more than one person. Back when she was healthy, the mother used to often throw salon parties and invite many friends over to the mansion. However, she currently had no contact or involvement with those people anymore.

"So there's no meaning in writing those…"

Ann did not come near the two, spying on their actions while hiding behind the curtains instead. She had been told to not disturb as her mother's letters were being written.

"There's need for privacy even between parents and children, right?"

That was a cruel demand for Ann, who was always glued to her mother.

"I wonder what they're talking about. Who is she writing it to? I'm curious…" she squeezed her cheek against the window frame.

To get them tea and snacks was not up to Ann, but to the maids. Therefore, she could not put on a good girl façade to eavesdrop on their internal affairs. All she could do was watch, just as she could not do anything about her mother's disease.

“I wonder why life has to be like this…” Although she attempted to spew out an adult-like line, since she was a seven-year-old, it did not have effect.

As she kept observing them with a shabby expression, she was able to take notice of many things. The two worked very quietly, yet they occasionally seemed to either become quite solemn or be enjoying themselves a lot. In the fun moments, her mother would laugh loudly while smacking her hand with force. In the sad ones, she would wipe her tears on a handkerchief lent by Violet.

Her mother was a person of intense emotional vicissitudes. But even so, Ann thought, wasn’t she opening her heart too much to someone she had barely just met?

——*Mom will be deceived again…*

Ann learned the ruthlessness, indifference, betrayal and greed of people through her mother. She worried sick about the latter, who was too quick to trust anyone. She wished her mother would simply figure out how to be suspicious of others. Yet, perhaps her mother did intend to entrust that Auto-Memories Doll, Violet Evergarden, with whatever mystery was hidden within her heart.

During her stay, Violet was introduced in the household as a guest. At mealtime, the mother invited the young woman to join them but was refused. When Ann asked why, she coldly replied, “Because I wish to eat by myself, Young Mistress.”

Ann thought she was a strange one. Whenever her mother was hospitalized, no matter how warm were the meals prepared by the maids, they tasted of nothing. Food that she had to eat alone was just too irksome. That was what meals were about.

As she caught a maid off to deliver Violet’s dinner to her room, Ann claimed she would be the one to do it. To know the enemy, she first needed to interact with her.

The menu was soft bread, vegetable soup with chicken and colorful beans, fried potatoes and onions garnished with salt, garlic and pepper, roasted beef with sauce and pear sorbet as dessert. That was the usual in the Magnolia house. Though it could be considered rather luxurious, as Ann had grown up in a wealthy environment, it felt plain to her.

“There’s no helping it since Mom overlooked this. We need to increase the amount of meat for tomorrow. And no sorbets; it has to be a cake. In a way… she’s a guest.”

To not forget about hospitality no matter what was the gift of good families.

As she reached an oak wood door – the one of the guest room –, she called, as her hands were occupied with a tray, “Heeey, it’s dinner time.”

Rustling sounds came from inside, and after a while, Violet opened the door and stuck her head out.

As she did so, Ann grumbled, “It’s heavy. Hurry and take it!”

“I’m terribly sorry, Young Mistress.” She immediately accepted the tray with an apology, but as her expression was too apathetic, in the eyes of a child, she looked eerie.

Ann peeked through the open door behind Violet, who placed the tray on a desk. The guest room was a beautifully decorated one that the maids cleaned regularly. She noticed the luggage on the bed. It was a trolley leather suitcase filled with customs clearance stickers from various countries. It was open, with a small pistol protruding from inside.

——*Ah…*

In the split moment she was lost in thought, Violet came back. Just like in a pantomime show, the two of them kept moving in perfect synchrony.

Finally, Violet lost her wit. “Young Mistress, is a gun something usual for you?”

“What’s up with that thing? Hey, is it a real one?”

As Ann asked with excitement, Violet answered, “Since self-defense is a necessity for women that travel alone.”

“What’s ‘self-defense’?”

“To protect oneself, Young Mistress.” As she narrowed her eyes slightly, Ann’s body trembled at the movement of her lips. Were she a little older, the girl would probably have recognized that reaction as a sign of fascination.

A woman capable of numbing people with words and gestures was nothing short of magical. Ann felt far more threatened by Violet’s charms rather than the fact that she was holding a gun.

“So you… shoot that thing?” As she imitated the shape of a pistol with her hands, her arm was immediately straightened by Violet.

“Please enclose the sides more. If your hand is loose, you wouldn’t be able to withstand the recoil.”

“That isn’t the real deal… it’s a finger.”

“Even so, it should be able to serve as practice for a time when you’d possibly need it.”

What was that automated doll saying to an infant?

“Don’t you know? Women aren’t supposed to use these kinds of things.”

“There’s no separating women from men when it comes to carrying guns.” As Violet replied without hesitation, Ann thought she was the coolest.

“Why do you have that with you?”

“The next place I’ve been called to is an area of conflict, so… be at ease. I won’t use it here.”

“Obviously!”

At Ann’s sharp attitude, Violet lightly forced a question out of curiosity, “Is there no such arming in this mansion?”

“Normal homes don’t have that.”

Violet gave a puzzled look, “Then what do you do if a thief ever appears…?” Seeming truly doubtful, she tilted her head. Doing so, her doll-like features stood out even further.

“If someone like that shows up, everyone will know right away. This is the countryside, after all. It was the same when you came.”

“I see. The low crime rate in depopulate areas could be explained by this.” While nodding as if that had been a lesson, she looked like a child despite being an adult.

“You’re… kinda… weird.” Ann declared tensely, pointing her index fingers at Violet. Though she had merely said so out of spite, at that instant, the corners of Violet’s mouth lifted just a little for the first time.

“Young Mistress, shouldn’t you go to sleep? Staying up until late is prejudicial for women.”

Because of the unexpected smile, Ann was blown away to a certain degree and could say nothing else. Painted red, her cheeks denounced the truth behind her palpitations.

“I-I **will** sleep. You should sleep too, or else, Mom will scold you.”

“Yes.”

“If you stay up even later than this, monsters will come to tell you that you should go to sleep.”

“Good night, Young Mistress.”

Ann could not bear staying there or even standing on her feet anymore, leaving the place hurriedly. However, as she walked away, she found herself curious no matter what, glancing backwards the very next second. She could see Violet holding the gun behind the door that was still half-opened. Violet's expressions were mostly deadpan, so it was hard to tell her mood changes. However, even the all too young Ann could understand what she had seemed to feel at that moment with just a look.

——*Ah… somewhat…*

She was somewhat of a lone wolf. Incompatible with her current appearance, she held onto a brutal, fierce weapon. Ann could hardly imagine becoming attached to her, yet she was becoming familiar with the black gloves wrapped around Violet's hands. As she gripped the gun with those same hands and pressed its edge against her forehead, she looked like a pilgrim uttering a prayer. Before turning around the hall's corner, Ann's ears were able to catch said prayer.

"Please give me an order."She said to someone.

Ann's chest suddenly began to thump faster.

——*My face is hot. It stings.*

She did not understand very well why her heart beat so rapidly, but it was because she had caught a glimpse of a woman's adult side from Violet.

——*Strange. Even though I don't like that person, I'm interested in her.*

Interest was just a step behind of love. Ann did not yet know that, sometimes, feelings such as "like" and "dislike" could easily reverse.

Ann's observation of Violet went on even after that. It seemed the progress of writing letters was doing well, as the bundle of envelopes increased. Violet would glance discreetly at her direction every now and then, making her wonder if the woman was aware of her peeking through the window. In those moments, Ann's heart would throb. She ended up

acquiring the habit of grabbing onto her chest, to the point her clothes became wrinkled in that spot.

The changes in her behavior continued.

“Hey. Hey. I said hey. Put a ribbon on my hair.”

“Understood.”

Although she was sad that her mother was being monopolized, she could not bring herself to feel angry.

“What’s with this bread, so hard that I can’t even bite it?”

“I believe it will soften if you dip it in the soup, is that not the case?”

During the breaks in-between the letters’ writing, Ann would inadvertently chase after and hang out with her.

“Violet. Violet.”

“Yes, Young Mistress?”

Before realizing, instead of being referred to with a demeaning “you”, she was being called by her name.

“Violet, read me books, dance with me and catch bugs with me outside!”

“Please state the priority order, Young Mistress.”

Violet was hard to stick with, but did not neglect her in any way.

——*What a weird person. I kind of also become weird when I’m with her.*

Regrettably enough, Ann became obsessed with Violet.

The peaceful times met a sudden end later on. Ann’s mother had become a little healthier a couple of days after Violet’s arrival, but her already poor physical condition gradually worsened. Perhaps it had been a mistake to

expose herself to the wind outside. She had a fever, and the fuss over it came to the point of a doctor being called over to the mansion.

Even in such a state, she and Violet did not halt their work. The mother lay on her bed while Violet resumed typing the letters, sitting next to it. Not having consideration for her mother's condition, Ann came into the room with an apprehensive posture.

"Why do you push yourself so hard to write these letters? The doctors say it's useless…"

"If I don't write it now, I might never be able to. It's okay. See, it's… because my head is not doing so good that, when I was reciting, I ended up having this psychological fever. How unpleasant…"

As her mother smiled weakly, she could not return it. It was a smile that pierced Ann's chest. The fun moments had disappeared as if they had been a lie, and the bitter reality had abruptly come back.

"Mom, stop it already."

Although her mother had been fine ten seconds before, she could stop breathing in a matter of three minutes. The sorrow of living with someone like that wound up resurfacing.

"Please, don't write this letter anymore."

If doing so would give her fevers… if doing so would shorten her life…

"Please, please…"

…even if it was something her mother wished for, Ann did not want her to do it.

"Just stop it!" Her accumulated anxiety and depression burst out at that instant. Even Ann herself was surprised by her voice, which had come out much louder than she had thought it would. Just that once, she spurted out the selfishness that she would normally not hammer onto anyone, "Mom,

why don’t you ever listen to me? Do you prefer being with Violet than with me? Why do you not look at me?!”

It might have been better for her to have said it in a cute manner. She had accidentally let her distress show.

With a trembling tone, she ended up asking in an accusing way, “Am I… not needed?”

All she had wanted was to be paid attention to.

Her mother shook her head with wide eyes at her words, “That’s not it. There’s no way that would be the case. What’s gotten into you, Ann?” She panicked in attempt of lifting the mood.

Ann evaded the hand that stretched out to pat her head. She did not want to be touched. “You don’t listen at all to anything I say.”

“It’s because I want to write these letters.”

“Are the letters more important than me?”

“There’s nothing more important than Ann.”

“Liar!”

“It’s not a lie.” Her mother’s voice was internal and full of grief.

However, Ann did not stop her arguments from coming. Her resentment from how things were not going the way she hoped bled out of her. “Liar! You’ve always been a liar! All the time… all the time, it’s only lies! Mom, you haven’t recovered in the slightest! Even though you said you’d get better again!”

After having said the one thing that she knew she should have not, Ann immediately regretted it. Such was the kind that would normally be said in a fight devoid of love between parent and child. But that day was different. Her mother, red-faced from the fever, continued to smile silently.

“Mom… hey…” Ann called out to her in such state. The spur-of-momentum heat was suddenly gone. But as she tried to speak, her mouth was covered with a touch.

“Ann, please, go outside for a bit.” Tears spilled from the eyes of her whispering mother. The large droplets shook loose and eventually cascaded down her cheeks. Ann was shocked that her mother, who always smiled despite the pain she had to endure from her illness, was actually letting her tears be seen.

——*Mom cried.*

Since her mother was not the type to cry, Ann had believed adults to be creatures that never cried. After realizing that was not the case, the fact that she had done something terrible rang within her mind.

——*I’ve hurt Mom.*

Even though she knew that she, more than anyone, was not supposed to place herself before her mother. Even though she was convinced that the task of protecting her mother the most was up to her, she had made her cry.

“M-Mo…” She tried to apologize, but was driven away by Violet, who proceeded to drag her out of the room as if dealing with a dog cub. “Stop! Let go! Let go!” Ann said, unable to put up resistance, left alone in the corridor. Her mother’s sobs could be heard from the other side of the closed door. “M… Mom…” She clung to it, distraught. “Mom, hey…”

——*Sorry. Sorry for making you cry. That wasn’t my intention.*

“Mom! Mom!”

——*I just wanted you to take care of your own body. So that… So that… I could be with you even for a second longer, if possible.*

“Mom…”

——*It was just that.*

“Mom, hey!”

——*Is this… my fault?*

Due to the frustration of not receiving any response, her loneliness reverberated. She tried banging her fists against the door violently. Yet, even without hurting, her hands became weak and numbly fell down.

——*Was I being selfish?*

A mother that was at death’s doorstep. A daughter that would be left alone.

——*Was being together with her… something so bad to wish for?*

A mother that kept writing letters because she might not be able to do so in the future. A daughter that hated it.

The tears that had dried out were on the verge of overflowing again. Ann inhaled deeply and shouted in one breath, “Was someone else more important to Mom than me?!” As her shouts came out, she started bawling. Her voice was muffled, her timbre cracking. “Mom, don’t be writing letters and spend time with me!” The child begged.

To wail when their requests could not be fulfilled was simply what children did.

“Without Mom, I’ll be alone! All on my own! How long will this last? I want to be with Mom for as long as I can. If I’ll be by myself after this, stop writing these letters… For now, be with me! With me!”

That was it; Ann was just a child.

“Be with me…”

Still too young to be able to do anything, a mere child that had barely lived for seven years and adored her mother.

“I want to… be with you…”

Someone who, in fact, had always, **always** wept over the fate granted to her by God.

“Young Mistress.”

Violet came out of the room. She stared down at Ann, whose face was wet with tears. Just as the girl had thought that was a clearly cold treatment, a hand made its way to her shoulder. The warmth of such act abated her hostility.

“There’s a reason for me to be taking your time with your mother. Please don’t be angry at her.”

“But… But… But…!”

Violet crouched down to meet the small Ann’s line of sight. “It’s evident that Young Mistress is strong. Even with such a small body, you take care of your sick mother. Children usually would not complain or care for someone that much. You’re a highly respectable person, Young Mistress Ann.”

“That’s not it. That’s not it at all… I just… wanted to be with Mom for a little more…”

“Madam feels the same way.”

Violet’s words sounded like nothing but pity. “Lies, lies, lies, lies… because… she’s concerned about that letter for someone I don’t know rather than about me. Even though there’s no one else in this house that really worries for Mom!”

——*Everyone,* ***everyone*** *is all about money.*

“I’m the only one… I’m the only one who cares about Mom!”

The way her dark brown eyes saw it, adults and everything related to them were enveloped in untruths. Her shoulders shivered as her tears trickled to the floor. Distorted by said tears, her vision was as blurry as the world felt

to her. Just how many things in that world could actually be considered real?

“Even so…”

The young girl believed that, regardless of how long she would live afterwards, if the world was filled with so much hypocrisy and treachery from the very start of one’s life, the future did not have to come.

“Even so…”

The things Ann deemed as true could be counted with one hand. They shone unrelenting within such a false world. With them, she could tolerate any sort of dread.

“This is how it is… but even so…”

——*Even though I wouldn’t need anything else if Mom was with me…*

“Even so, Mom doesn’t love me the most!”

As Ann yelled, Violet placed an index finger against her lips at a speed that could not be perceived by human eyes. Ann’s body quivered for a moment. Her voice was perfectly ceased. In the quiet corridor, her mother’s sobs could still be heard from behind the door.

“If it’s about me, you can get angry as much as it will satisfy you. Hit me, kick me; I won’t mind whatever you feel like doing. However… please refrain from using words that would sadden your beloved, honorable mother, for your own sake as well.”

As Ann was told so with a severe face, tears started to rapidly form in her eyes again. The cries that she had suppressed and swallowed back in were fresh and painful. “Am I in the wrong?”

“No, there’s not a single thing you’re at fault for.”

“Because I’m a bad child, Mom became sick, and… will soon…”

——*…die?*

To Ann’s question, Violet answered in a whisper with a tone that was still a little dispassionate, but not thrown-off, “No.”

The tears traveled down from Ann’s stroppy eyes.

“No, Young Mistress is a very kind person. Sicknesses have nothing to do with this. This is… something that no one can predict or do anything about. Just as I can no longer have a skin as soft as yours in place of my robotic arms, it’s something that can’t be helped.”

“Then, is it God’s fault?”

“Even if it were, even if it were not… we can only concentrate in how we should live the lives that have been granted to us.”

“What… should I do?”

“For now, Young Mistress… you’re free to cry.” Violet opened her arms, her machine parts letting out a faint noise. “If you will not hit me, is it okay if I lend you my body instead?”

That could be interpreted as “you can jump on and hug me”, even though she did not seem like the type to say such things. Ann could cry securely, so to speak. Without hesitation, she embraced Violet. Was she wearing any perfume? She smelled of many different flowers.

“Violet, don’t take Mom away from me.” She said as she tightly pressed her face against Violet’s chest, soaking it with tears. “Don’t rob me of my time with Mom, Violet.”

“Please forgive it only for a few more days.”

“Then, at least tell Mom that it’s alright if I stay by her side while you’re writing. It’s fine if you two ignore me; I just want to be close to her. I want to be by her side and squeeze her hand tight.”

“I’m sorry, but my client is Madam, not Young Mistress Ann. There’s nothing I can do to change this.”

——*I really can’t stand adults after all*, Ann thought.

“I hate you… Violet.”

“I’m sorry, Young Mistress.”

“Why do you write letters?”

“Because people have feelings that they wish to deliver to others.”

Ann knew she was not the center of the world. However, the fact things never went as she desired caused more tears to pour down out of frustration. “Things like that don’t need to be delivered…”

Violet merely continued to hug the frowning Ann, who bit her lip out of displeasure. “There’s no such thing as a letter that needn’t be delivered, Young Mistress.”

It seemed her words were directed at herself rather than the girl. Ann pondered on why. Because of that, the phrase was somehow engraved strikingly in her mind.

The time Ann Magnolia spent together with Violet Evergarden was only a week. Her mother managed to finish writing the letters one way or another, and Violet reticently left the mansion once the contract period was over.

“You’re going somewhere dangerous, right?”

“Yes, since someone is waiting for me there.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might need. This is what the Auto-Memories Doll, Violet Evergarden, is about.”

“Can I call you if I meet someone I’d like to write letters to someday?” was what Ann could not bring herself to ask.

What if the woman died in the place her next client was at? Even if she did not, what if Ann ended up never finding someone she would want to write to? Taking that into consideration, she could not ask such a question.

While being seen off, Violet shook her hand briefly. It was several months after she had left that the mother’s illness reached its worst. She soon passed away. The ones who took care of her in her last moments were Ann and a maid.

Until she closed her eyes, Ann kept whispering, “I love you, Mom.”

The mother simply nodded slowly, “Yes, yes.”

In a silent, calm spring day, her dear mother died. From that point on, Ann was always extremely busy. In regards of her heirloom, after a discussion with lawyers, it had been decided to freeze the family’s multiple bank accounts until she was of age. She also hired a private tutor to live in the mansion and studied hard. As she wished to deeply mark the land with her mother’s memory, Ann worked to become a qualified bachelor with the same level of education as her.

She never again saw her father. He had attended the funeral, but they had merely exchanged two or three words. After her mother passed on, he completely stopped coming home. His mindlessness towards money was soon over as well. Ann did ask directly the reason behind his change of mindset, but believed it to have been a good one.

Ann opened a law counseling office at home after graduating. She did not earn much, but she no longer had maids, so it was about enough for her to sustain herself. She was also in the middle of a small love affair with a young entrepreneur who often came for counseling.

As she did not succumb to sorrow even after having lost her mother at seven years of age, people would ask, “How come you don’t break down?”

And Ann would answer, “Because my mother is always looking after me.”

Her mother was, of course, dead. Her bones resided in a family grave where their relatives had been buried for generations.

Yet Ann would say, “My mother has been rectifying and guiding me all this time. Even now.”

There was a reason why she would affirm that while smiling. It was connected all the way to the time she had spent with Violet Evergarden.

Ann’s eighth birthday was her first without her mother. A package arrived for her on said day. It contained a big stuffed bear with a red ribbon. The name of the sender was of her late mother, and the present was accompanied by a letter.

Happy 8th birthday, Ann. Many sad things might have happened. There might be several others to work hard on. But do not give in. Although you might be lonely and crying desolately, do not forget: Mom will always love Ann.

It was unmistakably a letter written by her mother. At that instant, the image of Violet Evergarden resurfaced in the back of her mind. Was that kind of service also included in her letter-writing job?

In the old times, although her mother had said she was going to write letters, everything had been written by Violet Evergarden. Could it be that that Auto-Memories Doll had written all of it imitating her mother’s handwriting?

When Ann questioned the postal agency about the surprising delivery, she was informed that they had signed a long-term contract with her mother and were supposed to deliver her gifts on her birthday every year. And it had indeed been Violet Evergarden who wrote the letter. All the others had been carefully stored.

Ann had not been told for how long those letters would keep coming as part of contractual secrecy, but they had arrived every single following

year. Even as she turned 14.

You've already become a wonderful lady by now. I wonder if you have found a boy you like. Your way of speaking and attitude are a little boyish, so be careful. I can't give advices regarding romance, but I'll protect you so that you don't get involved with a bad boy. This is about Ann, who has always been firmer than me, after all. Even if I don't do that, surely, if you're the one choosing, it will be a really great person. Do not be afraid of love.

Even as she turned 16.

Have you ridden in a car by now? Would you be surprised if Mom told you that I actually can ride in cars too? I used to drive a lot in the past. But I would be stopped by the people riding with me. They would go blue.

My gift for your birthday is a car with a color that suits you. Just use the enclosed key. But I wonder if it is now considered a classic model. Don't say it's lame, okay? Mom is looking forward to you becoming able to see various different worlds.

Even as she turned 18.

I wonder if you're married by now. What do I do? To become a wife at a young age is troublesome in many ways. But your child will definitely be cute, no matter if it's a boy or a girl. Mom guarantees that.

I don't mean to precipitously say that parenting is rough, but… the things you did that made me happy, the things you did that made me sad… I want you to raise your child with those in mind. It's alright. No matter how insecure you become, I am here. I'll be by your side. Even as you become a mother, you're still my daughter, so it's okay to let out a screech sometimes. I love you.

Even as she turned 20.

You've already lived 20 years now. Amazing! To think the little baby that was born from me would become so big! Life is truly whimsical. I'm sad

that I couldn't see you grow into a pretty young woman. No, but I shall be watching over you from heaven.

Today, tomorrow, the day after; you'll always remain a beauty, my Ann. Even if disagreeable people discourage you, I can say this with a puffed-out chest: you're gorgeous and the coolest young lady. Have confidence and move forward with full responsibility towards society.

You've managed to live this long because you've been taken care of by countless people. This is thanks to the structure of the community you're in. You've been helped out a lot without knowing. From now on, in order to pay back for that, please work even for my part.

I'm kidding, sorry. You're a hard worker, so saying something like this is overdoing it. Have strength and enjoy life, my dearest. I love you.

The letters kept reaching her forever. The words written by her mother were recited in Ann's mind by a voice that she would occasionally forget.

Back in those times, the feelings of her sick mother had all been addressed to her. Each and every one of them were future birthday cards to her beloved daughter. Meaning that the one Ann had been jealous of was herself.

"There's no such thing as a letter that needn't be delivered, Young Mistress." Violet's words echoed in Ann's ears beyond the borders of time. The letters still found their way to her, even as she was married and with a child of her own.

She – a woman of long, wavy dark hair, who lived in a huge peripheral manor owned by herself, which was located far from town – would make sure to go outside in the morning on a certain day of a certain month. She would wait while taking in the scenery spread out before her. When the noise of the bike ridden by the postman, clad in his green flock coat, could be heard, she would stand up with her eyes shining. Her figure as she anxiously waited while thinking, "Is this it, is this it?" was certainly similar to that of her late mother.

The postman arrived at the residence, handing to her a big package with a smirk. He who knew about the gifts sent to her every year offered warm words of his own as well, “Congratulations on your birthday, Madam.”

She replied with slightly wet dark brown eyes, “Thank you.” and, at last, she asked what she had been wanting to for a long time, “Say, do you know Violet Evergarden?”

The post office and the amanuensis business had a close relationship. Once Ann inquired with her heart pounding ‘what-if’s, the postman replied while grinning, “Yes, since she’s famous. She’s still active. Well, then…”

Once the postman took his leave, Ann watched him as she caressed the gift with a smile. Her tears slowly poured down. Still smiling, she whimpered a little.

——*Ah… Mom, did you hear that just now?*

That woman was still working as an Auto-Memories Doll. The person whom she had shared a part of her time with was still doing fine, and continued to do that job.

——*I’m happy. I’m really happy, Violet Evergarden.*

From within the mansion, she could hear a call, “Mom!”

She turned to the direction of the voice. Someone waved from the window she used to be at when observing her mother and Violet. It was a girl with slightly wavy hair that keenly resembled Ann.

“Another present from Grandma~?”

Ann nodded at her innocently smiling daughter. “Yes, it has arrived!” answering enthusiastically, Ann returned the wave.

Inside the house, her daughter and husband were about to commence her birthday party. She had to hurry back. Crying softly, she walked towards the mansion. As she did so, she was deep in thought.

——Hey, Mom. You said before that you had wanted to give to your child all the happiness you'd once experienced, right? Those words… made me incredibly happy. It really resonated with me, is what I thought. That's why I'll do the same. This isn't an excuse to see that person. That's part of the reason, but it's not all. I, too… have feelings I want to deliver. Even many years after our first meeting, I have a feeling she definitely will have not changed. With her beautiful eyes and clear voice, she will write about my love for my own daughter. Violet Evergarden is that kind of woman – the one that does not disappoint. On the contrary; she was the type of Auto-Memories Doll that one would want to see doing her work once more. When I see her again, I shall thank her and apologize to her without shyness. After all, I'm no longer that girl who could do nothing but cry.

Ann Magnolia would never forget that woman who had embraced her back when she was younger.

I… remember.

That a young woman had come.

Sitting there, quietly, she would write letters.

I… remember.

The figures of that person… and of my kindly smiling mother.

That sight… surely…

I would not forget even if I died.

Chapter 3: The Soldier and the Auto-Memories Doll

Aiden Field, since childhood, proclaimed to his parents that he would become a baseball player. He was slender and his limbs were wrapped in supple muscles. Although he was not handsome by any means, the dark blond-haired boy’s face could be considered decent upon a close look. He was that kind of person.

He was talented at the sport enough to bear ambitions towards it, and after graduating, he had already decided to join a prestigious baseball team. His

parents were proud of their son. Although he was a small town boy, perhaps he could indeed become a professional baseball player. To him, such a future was already certain.

However, that path was no longer open.

As Aiden grew up, instead of becoming a baseball star, he found himself in the battlefield, within the dense forest of a continent far away from his beloved motherland. The oilfield drilling facility of enemy nation that his country fought were hidden. The mission of the 34th National Army, which Aiden belonged to, was to charge into the facility and take complete control of it.

The squad was a total of one hundred people. Their strategy was to split into four groups and strike from all sides. It was not supposed to be a difficult task, yet the people from said groups were currently scattered and fleeing.

“Run, run, run!” someone from one of the surviving corps shouted.

Had someone from their side revealed their plans to the enemy, or was the other nation simply a step ahead? It was supposed to be a surprise attack, but instead, they had been attacked first. The simultaneous raid from all four sides was easily destroyed along with the formation of the groups by the sudden rain of bullet amidst the darkness.

They were a last-resolve gathering of young men to begin with. They were different from instructed mercenaries. The youth who only knew how to properly operate farming equipment, the boy who said he wanted to become a light novel writer, the man who had opened up about having a wife that was in her second pregnancy – the truth was that none of them wished to be fighting there. There was no way they would wish for such thing. Regardless, they had come to that place.

After confirming from the corner of his eye that the people from the split-up corps bolted to the opposing direction, he himself also rushed into the forest breathlessly. The terror of him being done for no matter where he ran off to took over his body. He had actually heard agonizing screams the

moment his feet had kicked the earth. Erasing the cries of birds and insects, only said screams and gunshots resounded. From that, Aiden was able to accept the fact that all his comrades were being exterminated.

The feeling of being the hunter reversed into being the target that could be killed in a matter of seconds. It was a huge discrepancy – the former's fear was sinning, the latter's fear was losing their life. Neither of the two was good, but as human beings, neither wanted to die. They favored eliminating others rather than being eliminated. However, at the moment, Aiden was amongst those who were about to be killed.

"Wait!" a voice called from behind, its owner trotting up to him with a gun in hands. A small silhouette could be spotted in the dark. It was the youngest member of the squad, a child still in his tender years.

"Ale…!" Aiden grabbed the hand of the boy that had stopped moving his legs and resumed running.

"I'm so glad! Please, don't abandon me! Don't abandon me! Don't leave me all alone!" Ale pleaded while crying.

He was a ten-year-old born in the same province as Aiden, whom he was familiar with. As he was the feeblest of the squad, he was not counted as fighting power and worked as a replenishment boy.

By national decree, all men over sixteen were unconditionally enlisted in the military, and those of inappropriate age were deemed to be rewarded if they volunteered. The boy had once talked in slightly rude tone about how he had enlisted to pay off for the medical expenses of his mother, whose body was too frail. Aiden would rather see the child survive than himself. Even though he was supposed to worry about the boy first and foremost, his feet had moved on their own.

——*Ah, to think I would forget about this small kid and escape by myself…*

His eyes could see beyond the blackness.

“As if I would abandon you! I’m glad you’re alive! Let’s hide somewhere!”

The two sped up around the interior of the forest. While running, they could hear numerous cries from different directions. If they ran into the wrong place, death could be awaiting them with its scythe ready.

“No… I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die…”

Ale’s soft whispers to God and the terrified shrieks hurt badly in Aiden’s ears.

——*I don’t… wanna die either. There’s a lot of people I want to see again waiting for me, and a lot of things I want to do.*

“It’s alright, Ale. It’s alright, so just run, run.” He wanted to calm the boy down, but could say no more than that.

If he were one of the superior officers, would he be able to keep his cool while such a situation unfolded? The reality, nevertheless, was that he was just a young man. As he was in his late 10’s, he was not considered adult enough.

——*Ah, someone save us. I don’t wanna die in a place like this. I don’t wanna die. No matter what, I don’t wanna die.*

Gunshots echoed again, closer than before. He could see that leaves were falling from the trees in a certain direction and was able to tell that an enemy was approaching from behind. He wanted to stop his own breathing in order to even his loud heartbeats.

“Run! Run! Run!”

At the same time he mentally berated Ale for not being able to keep up, he reprimanded himself.

——*I’ll end up dying too. I’ll end up dying too.*

Yet, he did not think of letting go of that tiny hand. He could never do so. Aiden gripped it even tighter.

“Ale, faster!”

As they kept moving, an explosion occurred. His vision went completely white for a second. His body flew, then immediately hit the ground. It rolled onto the soil for about three meters and stopped once it hit a collapsed tree. The taste of blood spread in his mouth.

“Ta…” within seconds, his consciousness became blurry. But his eyes were open, and his limbs could still move. It was an unbelievable feat that he was alive.

That had most likely not been an artillery bullet. He whipped his body, covered in dirt from the impact, and confirmed his situation. The path he had been running on just a moment before had become a gigantic hole. The vegetation had been burned and everything was blackened. Aiden had no idea what their enemy had shot them with, but was aware that their position had been discovered, and that their enemy had no mercy in order to annihilate them.

“A… Ale…” even so, Aiden glanced at his side upon taking notice of the hand that he had not let go of. He went stiff as he realized the boy that was supposed to be there was not on sight.

——*He’s nowhere… Ale… is nowhere…*

The hand, still warm, it resided within his palm. But the rest was gone. No head, no legs. He could see nothing other than half of an arm, its bones sticking out of the torn flesh.

——*No way.*

His heart was so noisy it felt like his eardrums would erupt. He turned backwards. In a remote place, he could spot a small head between the fallen trunks. It did not move.

“Ale!” he called out, having spasms as he was on the verge of crying, he noticed the head flinch slightly, its mouth forming a smile.

——*Thank goodness, he’s alive.*

“Wait for me…”

Upon hearing the boy’s voice, he felt even more relieved.

——*He’s alive. He’s alive.*

The little head moved more, turning to look at him. He was covered in blood, but still alive. His arm had been blown off, but he was still alive. As Aiden was about to go to him and run away with the boy in his arms, the moment he made a move, more gunshots ensued. Those were not flashy bullet sounds like the previous times, but that resembled the sound of riffles. Aiden desperately ducked to dodge the shooting, while someone’s curt yelp could be heard from within the darkness.

——*“Someone’s”… yeah, right.* The only people in the surroundings were Ale and himself.

He did not rise until the gunshot sounds were gone. His heart beat at an unpleasant rhythm.

——*My heartbeats… are too noisy. Aah, be quiet, be quiet…*

“Why are you shooting so much? Are you having fun?” was what the dense rain of bullets made him want to ask. Once it ceased pouring, he raised his neck and realized that the little head had stopped moving.

“Ale…?”

The eyes that had gazed at him as if he was the only one they could depend on now ogled him as though they were about to fall off. The boy’s mouth hung open from back when he had uttered his last words. Ale had perished while staring at Aiden with wide eyes.

“Ah… ah… aah…! Aah!” strange screams escaped Aiden’s throat. He offed from the place as fast as he could. Still feeling the stare of those pupils on his back, he ran like crazy.

His heart hammered his chest. His mind was in uproar, as if it yelled with the intensity of a hundred people. Maybe that was because of the gunshots. Or was it because of Ale’s “wait for me”?

Every part of his body was disgustingly too warm. It felt like being baked in his own body temperature.

——*Ale is dead. Ale is dead.*

He knew there were several other people in that battleground who had ended up the same way. Many could already be dead from stepping onto landmines or being shot down.

——*Ale is dead. Ale is dead. That little Ale is dead.*

“Ah… aah… aah… aah… ah… ah…” screeches continued coming out of his throat in light of his feelings, which he did not even understand that well. Although he had intended to scream with all his might, his voice was too faint, insignificant in the sea of countless others. “Ah… Aah… Ah… Ah… Ah… AAAAAAAAAAAAH!” tears burst from his eyes. It seemed his breathing could stop from all the catarrh in his nose. Even so, only his legs moved, and he did not stop running.

——*No, I don’t want to die…*

Such were the most obvious sentiments – the instinct of survival, the fear of death.

——*I don’t want it, I don’t want it, I don’t want it… it’s fine even if I can never play baseball again. It’s fine, so… I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die. I didn’t come to this place… out of free will.*

“Mom… Dad!”

——*One more time… I want to see Mom and Dad one more time. I don't want to die. I have so many people I want to see again.*

The faces of the people from his hometown kept appearing in his mind one after another. Lastly, what he recalled was the smile of a certain girl. It was the face of his lover, whom he had left without being able to say goodbye to or even know the taste of her lips.

"Maria…"

——*If I knew things would be like this, I would have kissed and embraced her even if by force.*

"Ah, Maria…"

Even at a time like this, he thought of her so fondly.

"Maria!"

If he kept that up, he felt that he could die at any moment, even without receiving any bodily damage.

"Maria! Maria! Maria!"

And if that did happen, it would be deplorable if she continued thinking of him even after his death.

——*No, I don't want to die! I don't want to die!*

It was too pitiful, he thought.

——*No, I don't want to die! No, I don't want to die!No, I don't want to die!No, I don't want to die!No, I don't want to die!No, I don't want to die!No, I don't want to die!I don't want to die. I don't want to*

*die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to

return to. I have people waiting for me. Even so, why is it that a lad like myself have to take part in war? Who started something like this? At the very least, it wasn't me. At the very least, it wasn't me. I never wished for something like this to happen. I don't want this. I want to go home. I want to go back to my hometown. I want to go back to my hometown. Aah, I want to go back. Right now, I want to leave this place and go back to that beautiful countryside town. Right now. RIGHT. NOW.

"Ah…" a different, dumb-sounding voice dripped from his lips. His back was unbearably hot and he had to crouch down after an impact. As his knees could not immediately support his own weight, he fell face-first onto the ground.

——What… is this? It feels like there's lava pouring from my back… It's too… hot.

Unable to Aiden lay down, emptying whatever was in his stomach. To think he was vomiting even though he had not eaten anything. However, it was actually blood.

——Eh, no way… I threw up… blood… I… why…?

Aiden moved his neck to look at his back for the first time. He could see a black stain spreading out even in the darkness. There was no way it could be sweat. He was then able to confirm that he had been shot as he heard the sound of boots slowly approaching and spotted several armed soldiers coming from behind.

Upon seeing that Aiden could still move, the men laughed. If they were gambling, it was probably a wager on who could kill him with a single shot. Most likely, Ale and the others had been dealt with in the same manner.

“This is the fiftth.”

They seemed like young men of the same age as Aiden. Their bodies basked in the enjoyment of merely cornering someone, drunk with the atmosphere of war. Had they been born somewhere else and met different people, they might not have turned out that way.

Aiden had killed many random people in the frontlines, yet he had just come to understand what a warfare truly was. It was about murdering people, pure and simply. And those men had fun with it. Even with greater causes being used as justification, the essence of war did not change. To realize that only when he was about to be killed was ludicrous.

Whatever reasons nations had to fight each other held no value in combat zones. Such was the plain and cruel truth. Aiden was a murderer, the enemy were murderers, and one of them would have no choice but to die. As things turned out, the one soon to be wiped out was him.

——*Why have things become like this?*

The men chatted in spite of Aiden, who still lay on the ground.

“It’s thirty points if it hits the back.”

“I told you to aim for the head, didn’t I? Dumbass. We’ll lose the bet.”

“Enough already. Let’s look for another prey. This one can’t move anymore anyways.”

“Aim better next time.”

Once the talk was over, he would surely be eliminated. It could be in the most atrocious way, with his clothes striped off of him and his body dragged along the soil.

——*No…*

Tears spilled from his eyes again.

——*No, no, no.*

Once the laughing men were no longer watching him, he crawled onto the earth as to somehow flee.

——*I don't want to die like Ale. No, no, no, no, no. Anything but this kind of death. Someone… help. Help me. Someone… help me. Someone… God… God… God… God…!*

"Hey, don't ya go runnin' off." Along with a cold voice, the sound of gunshots echoed.

His leg had been hit. Perhaps because of being shot in the back earlier, he did not feel any pain, only the heat. Panicking at the fact that his sense of pain was numbed and that his foot no longer moved, Aiden cried.

The gunshots continued repetitively. It felt like a game. His remaining limbs were shot one by one as though to be made even. His body cramped with every shot, and the men watching snickered. Shame, humiliation, despair and grief assaulted his body.

"This guy's like a frog."

"This is fucking gross. Hurry and kill him."

"Yeah. Kill him, kill him."

"Next is the head."

The sound of a bullet magazine being filled ensued. Aiden was too scared of everything by that point, squeezing his eyes shut and preparing to die. It was at that moment that something tremendously huge fell from the sky like a clap of thunder. Swirling repeatedly, it pierced the earth. Was it a sign that a great existence was coming to put an end to such foolish conflicts? For a second, due to the shock, that was what all of the men thought. However, what had descended was not a mythical deity but a giant axe. Its silver blade was soaked in a red rain of blood. Its handle had a pointed tip in a shape that resembled a flower bud.

Axes were symbolic representatives of all weapons – more brutal than guns, more efficient than swords. Even if that was the middle of a battlefield, for something of that sort to fall from high above was nothing short of cryptic. And the abnormalities did not end there. A flying object noisily made its way towards them.

“It’s a Nightjar!”

Such was a monoplane that had been popularized in the weaponry industry and distributed from the prospering north to the rest of the country. It was a double-seat type of fighter plane, slightly bigger than compact one-seat boats. Its main characteristic was its form, which was similar to that of the bird it had been named after, with large wings and sharp fuselage tip. Its hull was thin but it was largely used as surveillance plane due to its outstanding speed.

——*Which side? On which side is it?*

Neither Aiden nor the soldiers who had been about to shoot him could move. Which of them was the Nightjar an ally of?

Someone dangled from a long iron rope that hung from the low-altitude plane. The person stretched their arm to grab the battle-axe cast down to destroy everything in that place, spinning around the holder several times before landing on the ground. Watching such acrobatic body movements, Aiden inhaled deeply, but his breathing only became disturbed instead.

The mysterious being slowly raised her head. Only her white face was truly visible amidst the darkness. It was like a white rose blooming in the night. Even with his vision slightly distorted by tears, Aiden could tell how stunning she was. Her blue irises reminded him of the far-off southern seas, her lips as red as the moonrise in a desert. Her facial features would have made his heart race were that a normal day, but in such a situation, he felt nothing but fright. Her golden hair shone brightly even in the blackness, making the burgundy ribbon on it stand out.

No matter how one looked at it, she was a woman as beautiful as a doll.

“Excuse me for interrupting your talk. I have taken the liberty to intrude from above.” Her voice resounded loudly, “Is Mister Aiden Field around here?”

Speaking so elegantly and bearing such dignified appearance, she could be either an angel or a death god, leaving the men bewildered. That was only the expected – with a woman of that caliber showing up in the battleground, one would not be able to help but wonder if they were hallucinating. Aiden, who had become a little relieved that the other men were focusing on her, was soon struck by dread again.

——*What… is this?*

Why was that woman looking for him? While pondering over it, Aiden was in a dilemma and could not think of anything to do other than answer to the unfathomable entity, “I-It’s me… I’m Aiden.”

Maybe revealing his name had been a mistake. It could put him in an even worse situation. Even so, the faces of the people from his hometown resurfaced in his mind.

“Help… me…” he pleaded hoarsely.

As the woman’s emotionless eyes stopped on him, who still lay on the ground, she graciously bowed her head. “Pleased to make your acquaintance. I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might need. I’m Violet Evergarden from the automated dolls service.”

By the time the soldiers came to their senses and pointed their guns at her, she was already holding onto her own weapon. It was an axe larger than the average human height, yet she lifted it with both hands as if it weighted nothing, like some sort of monster. The men shivered from fear.

“What the hell is this woman?! Alright, just kill her! Kill her!”

“Di… Die, die, die, dieee!”

Gunshots echoed together with the shouts, but the woman remained unharmed while readying axe, which did not obtain a single bullet scratch.

“Here I go… Major.” After whispering lowly, the woman jumped over Aiden, aiming to slash the men. Though she looked petite and fragile, every one of her footsteps resounded thunderously.

Since Aiden was in such a precarious state, it was hard for him to twist his neck and look backwards, yet he yearned to see the state of the fight enough that he somehow managed to watch it from the corners of his eyes. It appeared the woman was dancing rondo, but in actuality, she was merely swinging the axe towards the opponents by swirling widely. It was an exceedingly bizarre technique. She would protect herself from attacks by using the blade almost as a replacement for a shield, then grab onto the handle buried in the earth and lift it upright, spinning on her heels.

The men who soon could not defend themselves from the offenses delivered by such a delicate body surrendered and started screaming. Even though her movements seemed light, the outcome they had led to was the opposite. She mastered a variation of certain-kill classical martial art that Aiden had never witnessed before. The guns were being shattered by the tip of the axe’s handle as though they were as brittle as children’s toys. Just by also being hit by the handle on their shoulders, the men were brought to their knees.

“She’s… a monster!” one of them yelled, running away without being pursued.

The woman concentrated solely on attacking the men that confronted her in a machine-like manner. It was obvious she was accustomed with extreme battles, to the point that the word “accustomed” itself was an understatement.

“This… damn woman! Die! Die!”

The woman swiftly continued to exchange blows with the men that shot blindly into the darkness, swinging the axe without hesitation and gradually getting closer to them while dodging the bullets. The instant one

of them reached for a weapon in his pocket and charged at her stomach, she spun her slender legs broadly and kicked him in the face.

None of her flowy moves went to waste as she kept landing consecutive blows. The difference in power was overwhelming. Surely, even if there had been more soldiers against her, the situation would have not changed. It was as if the woman's strength resided unshakable within the axe she held onto.

——*Why… doesn't she use the blade?* Aiden thought puzzlingly. With such a vicious axe, she could easily put an end to everything if she used its main force, but did not do so. Settling for wielding it as a blunt weapon, she did not give any fatal blows.

The battle was short-lived. After beating everyone but him, the woman returned to Aiden's side. Squatting, she peeked at his face. "I am sorry for the wait."

It was then that Aiden noticed how the one named Violet Evergarden had a face with reminiscing child-like features.

——*Isn't she… about as old as me?*

Her well-developed beauty gave the impression of a mature adult woman, but her figure was also close to that of a girl.

"Master…" Violet gasped deeply upon taking a closer look at Aiden's whole body.

"Th… Thank you… for saving me… Hum… how… do you know me?"

As Aiden spoke with a trail of blood coming out of his mouth, Violet took a set of bandages from her bag and started wrapping them around his wounds. "Master has called for me. You contacted the automated dolls service after seeing our advertisement, is that not right? The fee has definitely been paid."

Hearing that, Aiden searched in his memory despite his reasoning becoming hazy due to blood loss. Come to think of it, he had been shown an old pamphlet by someone from the corps while drinking at the bar of a city next to his former battlefield. The bar's bulletin board was filled with varied informational services, message fliers and memos, and the man had found that one pamphlet among them.

"So it was true… that 'the automated dolls service will rush anywhere anytime'?" he smiled at the promotional catchphrase. It was at that second Aiden recalled he had indeed contacted the service as punishment for having lost at a card game, and it had cost him an absurd amount of money.

"What type of doll do you wish for? We take any request."

After being asked by a young man on phone, Aiden replied without thinking much, "I'd like an exquisite beauty who could come into the frontlines. Ah, a female, please."

"The dolls required to travel to dangerous areas are especially expensive."

"Is there no way to make it cheaper?"

"A relatively cheap offer is if you rent one for the minimum time of one day."

"Then I'll go with that. Hum, my account is—"

He had forgotten to cancel the order afterwards, and had probably not spoken so articulately on the phone since he was drunk at the time. Amongst the people that had partied with him like idiots, no one remembered what he had done the next day due to being hungover.

——To think she… would really come… Plus, a woman like this alone in the middle of a combat zone… one exactly the way I asked for, no less.

As Violet’s figure reflected in Aiden’s eyes, she looked like nothing other than an angel.

“H-How… did you know where I was?”

“Company secret. I cannot answer that.”

As she refused so curtly, he could only fall silent. If a mere amanuensis corporation had managed such a feat, how in the world could it be a “company secret”?

“For now, Master, let’s just get away from here. Does your body hurt? Please endure…”

“No, it doesn’t hurt… just feels really hot… This is… probably… pretty bad, right?”

At Aiden’s tearfully voiced question, Violet swallowed whatever she seemed to be about to say. After a momentary silence, she accommodated the axe in a holder fastened around her body and put her arms around Aiden. “I’ll have to treat you like luggage for a little while. Please bear with it.”

Her body enshrouded with strength, she lifted him up. In spite of her previous statement, it was closer to carrying him like a princess. Embarrassment seemed possible even at such a time, and Aiden felt like laughing through his tears.

From that point, Violet’s actions were quick. As she ran through the jungle despite carrying a grown man, he worried about whatever she would do if they encountered more enemies, but it seemed that would not be the case. Apparently, Violet had received instructions from someone. A voice occasionally leaked from the big pearl earrings she wore, and she would move after replying to it in low tone. After a short while, the two arrived at an abandoned cottage with the intention of using it as temporary hideout.

——*Is this place really safe? It's not like we can hide forever, either.* Aiden thought. He somewhat understood through his body's condition that he would not last much longer. Violet had treated him with first-aid, but his bleeding had not ceased. If that were possible, it would already have stopped.

"Keep your body hidden here for a little bit."

The inside of the cottage was covered in spider webs and dust. Letting Aiden down on the floor, Violet rummaged in her bag, pulling out a blanket.

"There's… a lot… inside that, huh?"

The corners of Violet's lips lifted slightly at Aiden's question. After straightening the blanket, she placed Aiden in the middle and enclosed it around him.

"I feel… stuffy…"

"It will become cold later."

"Is that so?"

"Most likely. I have been told so." Those were like the words of someone who had seen countless people pass away.

Aiden felt even more intrigued by Violet. What kind of background did she have? How was she so strong? Many questions floated about in his mind, but what came out of his mouth was something completely different, "Could you… write a letter in my stead?"

Violet's expression stiffened at Aiden's words.

"Or maybe… could that telecommunication device of yours reach my country?"

"No, sadly."

“Then, please… write me a letter. You came here… because I hired you, right? Please write it. After all, it feels… like I’ll die soon… so I wanna… write a letter.” His throat started to grow dry and he coughed after speaking.

While watching him spit blood, Violet rubbed his shoulders and nodded. “Understood, Master.” Her face expressed doubt no more. She took what seemed like good quality paper and a pen out of the bag, placing it on her lap, telling Aiden to recite the letter for her.

“First is… Mom and Dad, I guess…”

He talked about how they had raised him with so much love, how they had taught him baseball, how they were surely very worried since not many letters could be delivered from the battlefield, and how his last letter had turned into his will. He then conveyed his gratitude and apologies.

Writing rapidly, Violet captured his feelings with preciseness. Whenever the words piled up, she would ask if the terms used were good enough, bettering the letter’s contents. Aiden had not been able to write to his parents with frequency partly due to being no good with gathering his thoughts, but it was different with her around. Words were born one after another – all he had wanted to say overflowed.

“Mom… even though I had told you… that I’d become a baseball player… to get money for you to restore our house… I’m sorry. Dad… Dad, I had wanted you to watch more of my matches. I was really happy… when you told me you liked seeing me hit the ball. I… I actually started baseball because I wanted to be praised by you. I feel that, if there was… anything else you praised me for… it would have been an option too. There’s nothing more fortunate… than to have been born as your son. I wonder why. I’ve… always… been so happy… and, well… I’ve gone through quite a lot of hardships… but… I never thought I’d die like this.”

Even though he had not been taught by his parents how to kill…

“I didn’t think this would happen. Like, normally… normally… people imagine becoming adults, finding a lover, getting married, having kids…

I-I… I… I thought I would be able to take care of you. I didn't think… that I would be shot without really knowing why… and die in a country so far away from you. I'm sorry. I'm also sad… but the two of you… surely… will be sadder. I was supposed… to come back to you securely… since I'm your only son. I was… supposed to come back. But… I won't be able to. I'm sorry. Sorry." He resented so much not being able to see his parents again and felt so guilty that his tears recurrently halted his words. "If… the two of you end up being reborn… and becoming a married couple… I'll go there. And then… I want you to give birth to me again. Please. I didn't intend for it to end like this. I had wanted… to become happier… I was supposed… to show my happy self… to you two. It's true. So… please. Dad and Mom, you pray too. Make me your son again… please."

Violet wrote down every single word he sputtered. "I could make them more accurate, but at this rate, I feel it will be better if the letter contained Master's way of speaking."

"Rea… lly? Would it be okay… even without prettier words?"

"Yes… I think this way… is better."

"When you say it like that, I kind of feel… into it…" he compulsorily laughed, coughing more blood.

Violet wiped his lips with an already blood-soaked handkerchief. "Is there anyone else you wish to write to?"

As he was asked so with a hint of urgency, Aiden was quiet for a moment. His vision was blurry even though tears were no longer coming out. Violet's voice was also somehow distant. If Violet was in a hurry, he must have been looking terrible. He was about to die.

The smile of a simple girl with braided hair came to his mind.

"To… Maria." As he whispered her name, his love engulfed him to the point of wanting to bite something.

“Miss Maria… is it? Is she from your town?”

“Yeah. If you deliver it together with my parent’s, you should be able to know who she is. She’s a childhood friend from the neighborhood. We were together since we were little… she was like a little sister… but after she confessed, I realized I probably… liked her too. But… I came here… without having done anything couples do with her. It’s kind of awkward to date a childhood friend… haha, we should have… at least kissed… I would have been glad to, honestly. I’ve never… done it before.”

“I shall transfer these feelings of yours to the letter. Master, just a bit more… please do your best.” As if making a wish, Violet tightly held Aiden’s hand.

Unable to feel her warmth or even her touch, he started weeping again. “Yeah.” After organizing his foggy thoughts, Aiden began to speak, “Maria, are you… doing good?”

——*The reason why I’m starting this letter with such a casual greeting… is because I don’t want you to feel me dying.*

“I wonder… if you’re… lonely… that I’m not there. It would be a problem… if it turns out you’re crying everyday… but I’ve… seen your crying face… since we were kids… and it’s cute, so you shouldn’t… cry in front of men.” Memories of the time he spent with her replayed one after another. “I wonder if you remember… when you… confessed to me. You had… told me to not reminisce… to that time, but… y’know, I… I… was really… really… really… happy back then.”

——*The way you smiled in my arms with your cheeks dyed pink.*

“I was really… so happy…”

Her figure when she was still small. The time she started letting her hair grow long. The woman Aiden loved deeply just from the moments they had spent together was carved within him.

“That was probably… the peak… of my life… seriously. I mean, I can’t remember anything else. Much more… than when I… won a baseball tournament… or was… praised by dad… what made me… the happiest…”

——*My Maria. My Maria. My Maria.*

“…was being told… that you… were in love with me.”

Being told for the first time by someone other than by his parents that he was loved without any hesitation.

“To tell the truth… I used to… only see you as a little sister… but you’re… too cute, so… I soon… fell for you… You will… become even more gorgeous from now on, right? Aah, I’m jealous… of the guys that will be able to see it… If I could… I’d have… wanted to… make you… my bride… and lived… built a small cottage… in that countryside, with you. I… loved you. I love you… Maria. Maria… Maria…”

——*Aah, my cute girlfriend. If only you were here right now.*

“Maria, I don’t wanna die…”

Violet’s breaths rang loudly in his ears.

“Maria, I wanna… go back to you…”

——*Aah… my head… is gradually… melting.*

“I wanna… go back… to… you…” He could not keep his eyes open. But if they closed, he felt the words would stop as well. “Maria… wa… it… even if… it’s just… my soul… I’ll come back… but it’s… fine if I’m… not your only… just wait. Just… don’t forget… don’t… forget… the first man… that you… confessed to. I also… won’t… forget. Even by… the gates… of heaven… I won’t… forget. Maria… don’t… forget me.”

——*Violet, is it… all written?*

“Ah… no good… my… eyes won’t… open. Violet… I entrust… my let… ter… with… you… tha… nk… you… for saving me… and for…

coming… I’m not… alone… I’m… not… alone…”

“I’m here. I’m… right here. I’m by your side.”

“Please… please… touch me…”

“I’m holding your hand now.”

“Ah… some… how… it’s… true… it’s… gotten… cold. It’s… true… I’m… cold… I’m… co… ld…”

“I’ll pat your hand a little. It’s fine. It’s only cold for a while. Soon, you’ll find yourself in a warm place.”

“I’m… lonely…”

“It’s alright. Master, it’s alright.” Violet’s voice sounded a little pained.

Aidan progressively lost track of where he was. Where was that place? Why was his head so unclear at that moment?

“Da… d…”

——*Hey… I’m scared… Mom, for some reason… I can’t see anything… It’s scary…*

“M… om…”

——*I’m scared. Scary, scary, scary.*

“It’s okay.” As someone assured kindly, Aiden calmed down and smiled just a little.

At the very end, the words he had wanted to say no matter what left his mouth, “Mari… a… kiss… me…”

——*I had… wanted to kiss you. But… I was always too embarrassed… so I wondered if you could be the one to do it.*

A little after he thought so, he could hear the sound of touching lips.

——*Aah, I managed to have my first kiss with the girl I like in the end… Maria, thank you. Thank you. Let's… meet again.*

"Good night, Master." Someone's voice echoed from far away.

He was uncertain of who that "someone" was, but one last time, Aiden uttered a whisper as light as a breath, "Th… ank… you…"

Violet hugged the letter of the young man that had died in front of her while crying, before carefully packing it into her bag. Standing up firmly, she addressed to the communication device, "As of now, I'll be returning. Please report where the landing point of the transport unit is. Also, this is my own selfishness, but… I'll pay the transportation expenses, so please… let me take… one corpse with me."

There was not a single teardrop on her face.

"Well, even if you say it's a shortcoming, it can't be helped. I understand. I don't… always do things like these, so… yes, please. Thank you very much." She spoke dispassionately, as though she was in an office. However, as she carried Aiden Field's body once again, that time, she held him far more lightly, not at all bothered by the bloodstains it left on her white one-piece. "Master, I will take you home." She said to the boy that smiled a little with his eyes closed. "I will definitely… take you home." In her expressionless features, only her red lips trembled slightly. "That's why… you won't be lonely anymore."

Embracing the youth, she silently left the cottage. From beyond the jungle, gunshots and screams could still be heard, but Violet did not turn back.

The amanuensis business and postal companies had a close relationship. Normally, the letters of the amanuensis would be delivered by postmen, but since this one came from a distant country in war, the Auto-Memories Doll delivered it personally.

A beautiful agricultural area surrounded by golden rice fields. She could agree that it was a bucolic town as splendid as it seemed when the young man wailed that he had wanted to come back to it. Even as Violet, an outsider, peeked out of the window of the carriage she found herself in, every by-passer greeted her.

To that tender land, she brought a sorrowful message.

Her destination was Aiden Field's birthplace. Violet reported everything to the elderly couple that had answered the door, handing the letter – handing "him" – over to them. She then proceeded to tell them about his last moments, not forgetting anything. Maria, the girl whose illusion "he" had seen just before passing on, was there as well. They listened to her talk while shedding tears without uttering a word. It seemed the boy's image was imprinted in their hearts as to never be forgotten.

The girl, red-faced, broke down when accepting Aiden's letter. "Why? Why did he have to die?" she asked Violet.

The latter remained silent, not answering any of the questions. Even though she was normally expressionless and would merely say whatever she was supposed to quite frankly, she was at a loss for words upon being hugged by a crying woman at the time of her departure.

"Thank you."

That was an unexpected thing to hear.

"We'll never… forget your kindness."

As though not used to being embraced by someone, her body stiffened and flinched awkwardly.

"Thank you… for bringing our son back."

At such warmth, her eyes expressed bewilderment.

"Thank you."

She stared at the woman who conveyed her gratitude while crying – at Aiden's mother. For Violet, it was somehow unbearable, and she replied with a weak, "No… No…" An ocean of tears spread gently within in the blue orbs that looked at "him". "No…" The sea turned into a single, light droplet, and poured down her white cheek. "I'm sorry… I couldn't protect him." Those were not the words of the Auto-Memories Doll Violet Evergarden, but of a young little girl. "I'm sorry… for letting him die."

No one blamed her. Even Maria, who had lamented along the lines of "Why?!", did not find Violet to be guilty. Everyone present simply embraced each other and shared their grief.

"I'm sorry…" Violet continued to apologize repeatedly in a low voice. "I'm sorry for letting him die."

"Tha… nk… you…"

No one blamed you for anything, Violet Evergarden.

Chapter 4: The Scholar and the Auto-Memories Doll

For his young self, that person was his entire world. He would never have thought she would be gone one day. If she were not already there from the start, at the very least, she was his outright guardian from the moment he was born until he became aware of the things around him. She would find him whenever he ran off crying and praise him whenever he did something good. If he reached out his hand, she would even embrace him. She was a grand existence, better than him at everything.

He thought that was what a parent was supposed to be.

——Take my hand. Otherwise, I can't walk. Look at me. I can't live without being watched over by you. Don't go anywhere. This responsibility is upon you.

The ones devilish enough to hoax that person and steal her from his everyday life were to him criminals that should be judged – devils that had destroyed his world. Even having such depraving intentions was a sin in itself.

After he had stopped contemplating the door that would not make any sounds of someone coming back home no matter how much time passed, he came to despise everything that had led to his crumbling down. He would never be misled, lying to himself that he was okay with it. He would trust no one, always incompatible with others. And he would never fall apart. Such was his desecration against his old self that had cried while staring at the door.

He believed being that kind of person was acceptable.

Eustitia, a city renowned as the capitol of astronomy, was located on a low-inclination mountain range. Its people, living at about 1,500 meters above sea level, were observers enchanted by the night sky stars. The center of Eustitia, built by shaving off the mountains, was its Observatory, stone buildings densely congregating around it. The only way to reach the city that practically sprouted from the extensive land was to ride a train to the base of the mountains, then hop onto a ropeway that creaked rustily as it rose. Unlike most metropolises of several hundred kilometers sparkling with neon lights, it was a world under a sky untainted by human-produced colors, enveloped in a natural jet-black veil.

On one side, it was called the capitol of astronomy due of its superiority in astronomical observation, but it could also be said that the most remarkable characteristic of the city was being the home of one of the world's leading astronomical research institutes. It was named after a maritime navigation king that had managed to get his hands into enormous amounts of wealth during his lifetime, Shaher. Observatories that had been erected in many places under influence of the deceased Shaher's hobbies

still existed, as courtesy of the continuous sustenance from his family group.

The Shaher Astronomical Observatory's Research Institute ensured a vast assortment of activities, such as discovering new stars, researching anything related to astronomy and manufacturing telescopes. Meanwhile, the Shaher headquarters in Eustitia managed books about every known star, collected from all over the world. Having been established as the annex of the astronomical observatories, said headquarters safeguarded a gigantic library that could make book addicts salivate and pass out with just one look. Of course, every one of its books were about stars and the myths related to them. But even so, the amount of works it possessed was overwhelming.

In the atrium room, black iron spiral stairs that went on forever served as bridges between each floor, while an order-made gold chandelier that formed the image of a star descended from the ceiling. Not the slightest gaps could be spotted in-between the books stuffed in the shelves. Many desks and chairs could be found scattered around the place, but sofas were in bigger number. From cloth-covered luxurious ones to cute ones with cat legs, the sofas of many different shapes and qualities were support for the researchers.

The people who worked there were in charge of diverse tasks, such as arranging classifications, providing assistance for visitors and decoding ancient writing of foreign literature pieces. Amongst them, the one said to be the least appealing job was in the manuscripts department, which preserved books so old as to be on the verge of deterioration. Just as the name indicated, it was the department where already published handwritten books were transcribed into typewritten format.

Although the people from said department steadily worked on the manuscripts to an astounding extent every day, they currently found themselves in the middle of a small crisis. A large amount of astronomy books had been selected out of an ample literary collection bought from a certain influential family's warehouse. The great number of volumes was a problem, but even more so was conserving them, given the state they were in. The texts were barely readable and many pages would rip when turned.

The only thing that could be done without damaging the books was opening them. In addition, the number of people in the manuscripts department was of eighty employees. Even without days off for a whole year, they would still not be done rendering all the manuscripts that had been brought in.

Taking the condition of the books into consideration, it was required with urgency that all volumes were transliterated simultaneously. That was when those people gained the opportunity to come in contact with professionals from a completely different field of expertise – the ones unmatched at typewriting jobs, Auto-Memories Dolls.

The ropeway shook restlessly. Several well-dressed females of wide-ranging ages walked in lines through the opened door. From ladies with reading glasses to girls in their early teens, dressed in either western or eastern-styled clothes, of varying races and eye colors. Everything in every single one of them was note-worthy. And what they had in common was that all of them had been rented by the world's biggest enterprise, Shaher.

The last one that had hopped off the ropeway wore cocoa brown high-lace boots. The emerald green of the brooch on her chest shone foggily along with her golden hair and wondrous blue eyes. The dark red ribbon that decorated her head emitted a smooth luster and her white ribbon-tie one-piece dress calculatedly highlighted her feminine refinement. Her Prussian blue jacket finely matched her calm and dignified air, bringing out the milky white shade of her skin. She fixed her hold on her trolley bag and cyan and white-striped lace umbrella, turning it upside down and raising her face.

Clad a colorful micro-mini kimono, a red-haired oriental Auto-Memories Doll that had ridden the ropeway with her whispered to one of her co-workers, "In my country, people like that are nicknamed 'lilies walking amongst peonies'."

An unique flower that stood out more than any of the ladies in town. Without a doubt, she was exquisite. Her beauty was the kind that made it difficult to approach or speak to her. Unlike the others that got along well

and conversed with each other, she simply marched onto the stone-paved road towards their destination.

A young man observed the city through a small telescope from one of the rooms in the Shaher headquarters. As work hours had not yet started, he carelessly wore a flaggy, half-unbuttoned dress shirt and trousers, merrily watching the view outside from the window beside his bed.

“Leon, hey. Come take a look. The girls that ‘rush everywhere at any time’ are arriving.”

The other youth, Leon, responded to his roommate’s words with a frown, “How about getting changed? Since the amanuenses will be here soon.”

Fussy-looking almond eyes could be spotted behind his thin-framed glasses. His developing, young facial features indicated him to be in his mid-teens. His long hair was of a rare sea green color and his skin, which was the same shade as he had been born with and not a product of being burned by the sun, was of a beautiful brown. Unlike his roommate, he had already put on his necktie and buttoned his cuffs.

“Auto-Memories Dolls, huh. They’re gorgeous women that use beautiful words to write for their clients! Aren’t they worthy of being reverenced?”

Leon retorted in a low tone to the man that was about five years older than himself, “They’re like prostitutes, right? I’ve heard that aiming to get rich men to marry them is their objective.”

“Who told you something like that? Don’t you say it in their faces. You’re bad with words, after all… and women are scary when angered. Especially those who work like that. There might be women like you described, but these have come all the way to assist common citizens like us. Show some respect.”

“Shaher’s association will pay them, won’t it? If that’s their job, it’s not a reason to show respect. Since they were going to be paid anyway, the renting didn’t have to be of human-like dolls. Why do we have to let a bunch of women into our offices?”

“You mean the other invention of their creator, Professor Orlando? It seems that suggestion was already made. A lot has been discussed, but we couldn’t afford renting 80 of them to have one machine per person. They’re expensive. And there aren’t many corporations that make business from renting out things like that. It’s also easy to put together a large number of dolls when they have such a close relationship with postal companies.”

Though Leon was disgusted by those words, he understood them well. Postal affairs worldwide varied according to each continent, but the deliveries of postal items of their own continent did not follow patterns, as they were led by a private company. It was said to be the master of the current generation’s postal agencies aberration, where the users had to choose a postal company based on potential limits for the distributions and fees to have their items delivered. However, the Auto-Memories Dolls had a side-business partnership with the local postal agency. They gave off the impression of being high-grade exclusive use of the wealthier classes, but the fee plans were many. Moreover, the modest care of those carefully selected, well-trained women would often be requested more than once by the same user. Their presence in the market was not immense, but by no means was it small.

“We can’t extend their work hours too much, but if the price is more affordable, it’s fine if we hire cute human-like dolls. Things are better this way. They even make corrections in the texts. Besides, Leon… if the ones coming were men, you wouldn’t have uttered a single complaint, would you?”

Silence.

“I seriously think your hatred towards women… is disproportional. I don’t know the cause… but I believe you’ll be cured from it if you fall in love. You miss out on a lot by not experiencing romance.”

Leon looked as if he was biting back cynicism. Although he was not fond of being told that his face of displeasure fit him well, his current expression matched his overall appearance. “Why does everyone… say that it’s weird to not be into romance?”

It seemed that was something he was used to hearing.

“No, I’m not saying it’s weird. It’s just a waste. What do you even live for?”

“People can live without that! I love my job, and I like this place. That’s why I’m put off by Shaher’s decision. Don’t you see we’re exposing our sacred work to something inappropriate? Letting women into a workstation packed with men always ends up in…!”

“‘Sacred… work’, huh…”

“It’s not something anyone can do. You and I are here because we’ve been chosen. Document-deciphering techniques require learning all sorts of languages. We of the manuscripts department are men of exceptional talent.”

“It’s dull, though. Men everywhere. We do have some women in charge of literature collections related to flowers, though… ah, but they might be the majority in the references section. I wish I’d been drafted there.”

Leon stayed silent while observing his roommate grin broadly at the approaching women. He put on the work jacket he usually wore over his shirt and left the room at once. Though he heard his name being called from behind, he ignored it.

The corridors were enveloped in the gentle morning atmosphere. From the windows, early sunrays shone brightly while pouring into the dim halls and bird chippings could be heard. It was also from them that he could see a fellow staff member writing the words “Welcome, Auto-Memories Dolls” onto a hanging banner.

The faces of the men he crossed paths with in the males’ dormitory seemed somewhat foolish. Even those who usually never bothered shaving their beards were now putting their bare jaws to display, frequently peeking into their hand-mirrors.

“Leon, good morning! Man, finally the fateful day has come… hey?”

“Why’s he making such a scary face? It’s the same as always, though.”

He passed by the spot without greeting his sneering colleagues.

“Everyone is so giddy about ‘women’ and ‘love’. Isn’t it pathetic?” Over being repetitively told the same things, within the silence of such a delightful morning, Leon clicked his tongue and kicked the wall with his polished leather boot. “To hell with ‘romance’!”

The birds outside immediately reacted to the violent sound; all the ones that had settled on the nearby trees flew away. His foot apparently hurting from the kick, Leon let out a groan after walking a few steps.

The entrance hall of the Shaher headquarters, where constellations and mythical characters were drawn on the dome-shaped ceiling, was where the Auto-Memories Dolls had gathered, their constant talking reverberating like ripples. Presented in front of their colorful figures was a member of Shaher’s manuscripts department’s personnel, who sported a comfortable-looking black gown known as an ‘academic dress’ and a square college cap with a tassel, letting out what sounded like a purposeful cough.

Upon a signal from his hand, other members with the same get-up appeared from the back in a line. Though there were several women, the men were in bigger number. Amongst them, Leon seemed to be the youngest. His youth was evident in the midst of so many adults, as each one of them tensed up with rigid cleverness typical of a group of specialists that had come from other countries.

“To the Auto-Memories Dolls here assembled, we are terribly sorry for the long wait. I am the manager of the manuscripts department, Rubellie.”

The chitchatting died immediately as the first man that had showed up spoke. As if synchronized, the Auto-Memories Dolls bowed elegantly in various ways, their voices becoming one, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master.”

The chorus was cheerful, incompatible with the old hall. Soon after, the women took glances at one another and burst out in giggles. Apparently, greeting at the exact same time was something they had not done before. Indeed, all of them were business rivals that had been dispatched by many different amanuensis organizations. And the women marketed as Auto-Memories Dolls were required to receive high-grade tuition regarding the details of their very old profession. Therefore, responding with grace to counterparties was to them a common rule.

Albeit flattered, Rubellie coughed once again and opened his mouth, “Your contract period is of a month. In that meantime, we will make a copy of hundreds of precious literature pieces. The total number of staff members in our manuscripts department is 80 people. My respected 80 Auto-Memories Dolls, the goal for the manuscript transcription progress in this one month is 80%. If I were to be completely honest, I wish you could stay for much longer, but the maximum availability for hiring extremely busy ladies such as yourselves is only of 30 days. Another reason is that the amanuensis whose efforts we had wanted to make use of in this limited time are frequently summoned by the military. All of us from the manuscripts department have awaited you from the bottom of our hearts. We will be in your care.”

As he took his hat off and bowed, the other members followed suit. Nothing had started just yet, but already something warm sprouted in the hearts of said experts, who found themselves in the presence of one another by a miracle.

After the introductions, work soon became the topic. The manuscripts were supposed to be worked on in pairs. Rubellie announced the partners one by one, and the people called would be sent to the workroom. Lined up with everyone else in the hall, Leon waited for his name to be called as well.

It seemed his roommate had been paired with a kimono-wearing Auto-Memories Doll. While escorting her, he turned backwards and showed Leon a firmly clenched fist.

“Next, Leon Stephanotis. Leon, please step forth. Your partner is… from the C.H. Postal Company, Miss Cattleya Baudelaire. Miss Cattleya Baudelaire, please step forth.”

The manuscripts department staff members held their breaths at the woman weaving her way forward through the remaining ladies. She had actual doll-like facial traits and body, and the air about her hinted that her attractiveness was not her only gift.

“A-Are you Miss Cattleya Baudelaire?”

The doll turned her head just a little towards Rubellie, whose throat had gone dry for a second. With watery blue orbs and long blonde lashes that cast shadows over them, the woman gave him a bewitching look that could perplex anyone without hesitation. “No, I have come here as Cattleya’s substitute. I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might wish for. I’m from the automated dolls service, Violet Evergarden.”

Her voice was enough to captivate everyone and take control of the entire place.

“I’m from the same postal agency as her. She was drafted for two jobs at the same time by mistake, so I was dispatched for this one. Her period of absence will be of a week, and after that, the originally-hired Auto-Memories Doll, Cattleya, will come. However, a message of apology from the president was supposed to already have been delivered…”

A young woman that seemed to be a secretary stepped beside the bewildered Rubellie. “I’m sorry. Come to think of it, we received a call three days ago. Since the only change to be made was in the registration name, I thought I could do it later and… hum…”

Rubellie waved his hand at the discomfited girl. “No, well… it’s fine as long as her place isn’t vacant. Now, Miss Evergarden, we entrust working with our grumpy Leon to you. Leon, your partner has suddenly changed, but a brilliant gentleman such as yourself will have no issues with that, right?”

With all the attention of the room on him, Leon remained quiet, not uttering a single reply.

“Leon…?” Rubellie peeked at his face from the side.

Even for an onlooker, it was as if his time had stopped. He even forgot to blink and breathe. An abnormality Leon had never felt before weighted on his chest.

——*My heart… is throbbing. What is this… what is this woman? What did she do to me?*

His eyes were wide open, his mouth agape, his ears flushed red. Such reactions were caused by the rare beauty in front of him.

“Leon. Hey, Leon?” Not even his superior’s words could reach him.

——*A strange feeling… is burning within my body.*

Violet tilted her head a little at the glare he shot at her, so fiery it almost could make one melt, calling out to him, “Master?”

Leon Stephanotis. Sixteen years old. Born and raised in the arms of Mount Eustitia, he had always watched the night sky, leading a life of ever being addicted to astronomy. His time was dedicated to the stars, with no openings in his routine for outsiders to sneak into. That was how things were supposed to be even now. Until the present moment, he had never known romantic love, as his misogynistic heart was being touched by someone else for the first time.

“I will now begin to write the words recited by Master without fail. About the graphs in this book, if you so wish, I could later submit a perfect copy of them. I’ve also heard that everything was supposed to be typewritten. Is it alright if the device I use is my own? Or is there one of yours already at hand?”

The workroom of Shaher’s manuscripts department was lively with noise. Several books lay on the lined-up sofas. The place was cramped with

people working side by side, pushing away the books and diagrams to uncover free space for the typewriters to be settled on. Such a thing was only the expected with the number of people having doubled. Leon and Violet sat on chairs beside one another, the gap between them so small that their knees could touch at any moment.

“Use the one in front of you. Each and only the modern devices in Shaher are unified by a common password. Don’t leak it.”

“Of course, anything related to Master’s job is strictly confidential.”

Not at all feeling intimidated by a device she was not familiar with, Violet started using the typewriter. Leon’s eyes kept being drawn to her stunning profile.

——*This is odd… as I thought, I’m not in good health.*

Leon struggled with the mysterious palpitation without having any idea of what its cause could be. While everyone else worked properly, it would be a disgrace for him as part of Shaher’s manuscripts department to become ill at a time like that. And so, without informing his situation to anyone, he desperately attempted to act like his normal self. However, the way people around them saw it…

“Leon… is blushing.”

“My… it’s definitely that kind of thing, isn’t it? He’s fallen for her, right?”

“So he did have interest in women. I was thinking that…”

“Ah, you too? I also used to think so.”

“Right… I mean, we’ve never seen him date anyone.”

“Uwah, I feel like a parent watching my son grow up.”

Leon’s friendly older colleagues were quick to understand his change in expression and had been worried, but ended up watching over him from their distanced seats as if having fun.

His title was of youngest astronomer with enough knowledge to be part of the manuscripts department. A young staff member who was acknowledged by his boss was likely to be seen as a nuisance, yet the men of the manuscripts department staff treated him like a little brother.

The curious onlookers' stares carved holes into Leon's back, but though he had noticed them, he settled for not saying a thing, glaring daggers at them in return. The ones being scowled at merely laughed and resumed their tasks.

Her hands still on the typewriter that had been readied for use, Violet gave a slight nod and fixed her gaze on Leon again. "No issues with the operation method. Now, Master, please start reciting."

"The first one we'll do is a description written in Lingua Franca about a comet from two hundred years ago named Alley. I'm warning you: I'm fast at translating. Usually, when we form pairs here in the manuscripts department, one does the translating and one writes it down. If you can't keep up, you're an unnecessary dead weight."

"I am aware."

That brief reply struck Leon as a sign of overly-confident attitude. A desire to break that pride bubbled within him.

"Then, let us see your skills." He carefully turned to page one of the book that was about to fall apart with a pincet. "An arrow of light cutting through the dark heavens reaped the neck of Saint Barbarossa with its hauling long tail. To quote the late astrologer Ariadne, 'the Light Arrow is a harbinger of ill omen'. After the shine of said light faded, a plague spread, and the kingdom echoed with news of its monarch's death. It's said that Saint Barbarossa was also shot by the Light Arrow, which torn apart his soul and body. From what Ariadne revealed, there have been appearances of the Light Arrow in the past. The reason of Light Arrow's existence is said to be the kidnapping of a bride by king Reinhart from the Fairy Country. In this occasion, a nobleman died. However, the fact that the woman was turned into Reinhart's wife while her former groom was offered as sacrifice in a blessed banquet is not a tragedy. He revived with a

new body in the Fairy Country, sited in the gap between life and death, with his soul preserved for eternity." Leon recited smoothly without pausing even once, not sparing a single glance to the one doing the writing. He could hear sounds of typing as he spoke, wondering how far she had gotten. Once he stopped to check…

"Master, please continue."

…Violet had just finished copying his recitation. He was taken aback for a second.

——*She might type quicker than me.*

Instead of amazement, he felt frustration.

"It seems I can go even faster." Leon cleared his throat, focusing his nerves and recommencing the translation. "Willingly or not, the nobleman's death impacted the peasants. Many become insane upon sighting the Light Arrow. Some would throw themselves into the lake while seeking its reflection and drown; some would chase it and never come back. There are also many who become strangely weak-spirited after having witnessed the Light Arrow. Moreover, the Light Arrow is not a sign of bad luck only in our country. A traveling troubadour once said that, in the Orient, there's a legend of when the Light Arrow set the sky on fire as it passed by. The people of that land would fill up bags with air to breathe into them until it was gone. It's been heard that there were also people that roamed around selling those bags filled with mountain wind. However, amidst the despair of watching everything be burned down by that entity running along the heavens, the helpless people could only stare. Great things always begin and end in places we cannot reach. If the ultimate end ever comes, it would surely be something as bright as that." He did not even stop to take a breath, exhaling heavily after speaking, then hurriedly turning towards Violet.

"Master?" She was already done typing, having perfectly transcribed the depictions into the document.

The frustration he had suppressed earlier merged with irritation. He somehow could not handle seeing her look so calm. “Don’t get cocky!”

Violet’s fingers moved rapidly onto the keyboard.

“No! Don’t write that! I wasn’t reciting!”

“My apologies.”

“Damn it… I’ll win no matter what… no! Don’t write this either!”

“My apologies again.”

After several hours of repeating the same process, the two of them were far ahead of the other pairs with their amount of work. While checking the copied documents, Violet glanced sideways at Leon, who held onto his throat that ached from reading too much.

“We were able to do the equivalent of three days of work today. Master, you are great.”

“Ah, is that so…” overtaken with sense of defeat, Leon did not rejoice much.

Her typing speed was a particularly noticeable ability even in the manuscripts department. Regardless of being a specialist, he had lost to an outsider, which he resented.

“I assume we were twice as quicker as the other pairs. Does this not mean that, we keep it up, we’ll be able to finish all of the paperwork by half of the contract period?”

“That’s… impossible.” Leon scanned the progress table placed on one of the workroom’s walls. The name of each pair and the goal progresses and achievements of the day were registered in it, and all pairs presented numbers far more advanced than planned.

It was then that Leon actually looked at Auto-Memories Dolls other than Violet. Even though that was their first break after working for eight

hours, they were all smiles, amicably chatting with each other. In contrast, much like Leon himself, the manuscripts department's men were completely exhausted. It could be an exaggeration to describe them as a heap of corpses, but it was not just one or two of them that had collapsed onto the nearby desks.

"How… can you girls be so energetic…?"

"By 'energetic', you mean…?"

"Anyone would get tired after doing so much transcribing… normally."

Violet blinked questioningly a few times. "Rapid writing certainly does require concentration and stamina, but that does not cause too much fatigue in comparison to traveling."

"'Traveling', you say… you mean to where your clients are?"

"Yes. It's part of our job as Auto-Memories Dolls to go anywhere a client needs us to at any time. Even if that turns out to be the interior of an unexplored dense jungle or a large nation hidden behind dozens of mountains, we can withstand taking any means of transportation while carrying nothing but our bags for a whole year."

"Even though you're women?"

"Most Auto-Memories Dolls are female."

"Well… even so… there are places that are dangerous, right?"

"That's right. But does not everyone have the minimum of physical strength and self-defense techniques? Since I'm from the C.H. Postal Agency, I am also assigned to conflict areas. In those cases, I carry firearms with me, which adds in quite a bit of extra weight. Typing for a few hours is…"

It appeared she had wanted to say "is nothing". Leon felt the irritation swirl in his chest again. But at the same time, his mind changed a little about the idea he had of Auto-Memories Dolls. From an ordinary person's

point of view, an automated doll was a special professional whose services could only be afforded by high society.

——*I thought they were entertainers of rich men, but…*

A posture undisturbed even after long hours of effort. The consistent composure of an attendant. Severe work conditions that do not seem to include definite days off. Agendas that demand going to dangerous areas. If anyone were to ask him if he could do it all, the answer would be no.

“Why are you… doing such a hard job?”

——*It’s not the kind of thing one could accomplish just by wishing to marry a rich guy.*

Violet answered blandly, “It’s the role that was given to me.”

“By your company?”

“That… as well. But never once did I think it was too hard. I think that… going all the way to my clients and depicting their feelings, as if I were receiving the thoughts of someone that had an ancient tale written in their mind and giving form to them, is extremely… unique… and wonderful.”

Her words instantly blew the weariness away from Leon’s body.

——*I understand. I totally understand.*

In the distance past, someone used to observe the stars and research them as he did now, and Leon could sense a romanticist feeling whenever that person talked about them. The empathy, admiration and fear he felt towards that person, who was no longer around, as well as the feeling of accomplishment of deciphering a manuscript for the first time, were all very exceptional.

“You’re right…”

It was truly wonderful.

“Even though… you’re a woman… you get it.”

“Does being a woman… have anything to do with it?”

“Well, no… there isn’t…”

Upon being praised by that Master for the first time, Violet let the corners of her lips curl up a little when he was not looking.

The Auto-Memories Dolls that had been nicknamed ‘penalty assistants of the manuscripts department’ continued working at full power the following days.

The thoroughly-educated ladies’ alluring demeanor and way of carrying themselves did not appeal only to men, as they were commended by other women as well. Amongst them, the one that stood out the most was Leon’s partner, Violet Evergarden. Her classy charm was one of the reasons, but what also attracted the men was her cool behavior. She started gaining worshipers.

“Be careful. People are envious of you.”

Although he was warned right away and did not understand it at first, Leon later realized what was going on. Even after finishing looking for materials or typing manuscripts out, the two of them always walked around the building together. Leon, who was bad with words and inept with women, and Violet, who, almost like a real doll, mostly spoke in a robotic manner, were not supposed to be a cheerful-looking duo. Yet logic did not reach those whose eyes were clouded by love. And the ones that were the most jealous were men outside of the manuscripts department.

“Then, what did you wish to talk about?”

Having hit a wall with the translation, Leon had headed to the library to search for a dictionary. Since the one he had wanted was in a place so high that he had to climb a ladder, he had left Violet waiting on a nearby chair. As he came back feeling triumphant after finally getting his hands on the

book like a treasure hunter, he found Violet surrounded by three young men of the references section, who smiled at her from ear to ear.

“Just that it’s a pity you got Leon as partner. He has a nasty personality.”

“True. Even though he’s an orphan that wouldn’t have been able to lead a decent life if it weren’t for Shaher taking him in…”

“A flower on a precipice like you would be wasted on him. If it gets boring, come to the references section. Do you like talking about stars? We’re better at that than the manuscripts department guys.”

Violet expressionlessly listened to everything being said.

——*Ridiculous.*

Leon clicked his tongue. Although he was easy to anger, he had received such treatment so many times that he was quite frankly used to it. Rather than fury, nothing was on his mind other than a part of himself asking in an amused tone, “This again?”

He was more than conscious of his own origins, his wicked character, the fact he was younger than everyone else and that very few people actually liked him. It was probably due to appearing unfriendly when dealing with people of other departments. His reputation amongst them was not quite positive. He might not even have had his work in the manuscripts department recognized had he not caught the eye of his boss, Rubellie. Leon led a lifestyle where he did not seek for other people’s affection, and therefore was never upset by defamation of that sort. He was not offended in the slightest.

“I am an orphan as well.” Violet’s words tore through the silence of the library as their impact was conveyed. They had considered her voice beautiful before, but it was the first time it sounded so pure. “I have most certainly not had the satisfying life you seem to be suggesting.” The impetuous sentence resonated casually.

——*She's… lying, right?* Was what Leon thought, but he could see her serene and frank attitude from the space between the men's backs.

"It's only been a few years since I have learned how to read."

Although his heart was unharmed by anything regarding himself, he was assaulted by pain at Violet's confession.

"Also, forgive me… for firing your words back at you, but… at the very least, the people from the manuscripts department more joyful and skilled than me when it comes to talking." Violet, still beautiful as ever, unpretentiously revealed herself. "If what you wish to discuss is about places of birth or childhood… would you mind if I do not participate?"

"T-This is wrong. You're not… like that. Right?"

"Nothing is wrong. Compared to Master Leon, I'm the one who has the most depriving life… I can assert it even without your confirmation."

"H-His mother was a wanderer."

"I don't even know my parents' faces. Besides, I myself am a wanderer. I'm an Auto-Memories Doll, after all. If you intend to advocate only for me, your remarks are contradictory."

"You're… saying this to cover up for Leon because he's your partner, aren't you?!"

Violet turned towards the man who had said so with his face beet-red. "I'm simply speaking the truth… however… that might be right…" Her golden lashes shook as her rouge lips waited for her thoughts to take shape. Violet Evergarden was most likely not the type to shrink back, no matter how much others urged her. "My contract might have been sealed by Shaher's management, but my master at the moment is Mister Leon Stephanotis alone. If you attempt to hurt him, I shall protect him with everything I have. This might be a deviation of my professional duties… however, it's my nature as a doll."

The young men, who were completely dismissed, had no idea how to refute.

“Let’s go, our words aren’t getting through.” With that one statement, at last, the three quickly stepped away from Violet.

Indeed, the world she lived in was different from theirs. Even if they were fellow human beings, even if they spoke the same language, that fact remained unchanged. It was as if they were facing one another on opposite shores – their words would not mesh. Such was an unfortunate truth, but there were many who would not realize the sad part of it.

An onlooker asked in low voice about what had happened and was told about Violet in whispers.

“What’s with her? Talking in that kind of way just because she’s pretty… who does she think she is?”

“Seems like she’s an orphan…”

Gossiping with no sense of guilt. People started talking loud enough that only those with damaged ears would not hear it. Even so, Violet sat down with a well-mannered posture and continued to wait for Leon. She awaited his return, and nothing else.

For Leon, her figure was unbearable for some reason. It was dignified. When he had first met her, too, he had thought she had a dignified beauty. Without a doubt, she was prettier than any woman he had ever met. The nobility of her caliber was admirable. However, she had just displayed a singular kind of beauty.

——*Something… something different. Something purer and immensurable. Something…*

She seemed like even more of a dazzling person now. That made his chest ache.

Leon clicked his tongue again and walked slowly, reaching his hand out for Violet.

“Master.” Violet raised her face.

At the same time, Leon held onto her arm and made her stand up. They made their way through the library’s extensive corridors in a fast pace. Their shoes rattled against the floor.

“Master, have you found what you were looking for?”

“It’s here.”

“That’s good.”

“It’s not.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not good at all!”

——*Isn’t it my fault that people started thinking badly of you?*

The subject did not go further than that.

“Is that so? By the way, does this library has books of departments other than the manuscripts one?”

“Hah? Of course… there are tons of books about constellations. Is there any you want to read?”

“Yes. For someone that travels often, it’s useful to collect knowledge.” Violet acted as if the previous disturbance had not affected her in the smallest amount.

Her object of interest was a pile of books close by. Not even the excessive warmth of Leon’s hand on her arm had put a damper to it. Even though he had wanted to leave as soon as possible, he stopped in his tracks instantaneously.

“Then, start choosing right now. You need a card for borrowing books. It’d be a pain to make one for you, so let’s just act as if I were the one borrowing them.”

“But… we’re in the middle of work hours…”

Leon once again felt indescribably itchy at Violet’s restraint. “It’s just a matter of picking a few of them, right? Besides, I made you wait, so this is retribution. You’re modest over some weird things. Even though you always say whatever you want…”

“My apologies.”

“I’m not mad, so don’t apologize.”

“You aren’t?”

No matter how one looked at it, Leon’s face showed displeasure.

“I’m not. This is just the face I have.”

With her lips tapering as if she was sulking, Violet narrowed her eyes a little. “I’m told I’m expressionless. Such is the face I have.” She said in a similar way to him. “We are a bit alike.”

Leon found difficult to release his hold.

“Then I said, ‘this is scary, huh’. And what do you think she said back? ‘You’re cute’! Kuuuuuh! I couldn’t handle it! She’s the one that’s cute! Right? Hey, are you even listening, Leon?”

Three days had passed since the collaborative work had started. As usual, his roommate babbled to no end instead of just changing from his pajamas. He had been talking about Auto-Memories Dolls since early morning, yet Leon had stopped listening midway. While he fastened his tie, something else was on his mind.

“I’m not. Your story doesn’t matter. I can’t think of anything other than the observation of Alley’s Comet that will happen in four days.”

“As I thought, you weren’t… Alley’s Comet had a cycle of 200 years, was it? Welp, if we miss this, we won’t be alive the next time.”

“I wonder how it can be so beautiful.”

“The tail of light created when the comet passes by is very fantasy-like in the existing images of it. I’m also looking forward to seeing it. I’m thinking of inviting my partner. Come to think of it, wasn’t your super pretty partner only going to stay for four more days?”

“My chest… hurts unbearably… when I look at her.”

“Why don’t you try to invite that pretty girl, Violet? And hey, what did you say just now? Weren’t we talking about the comet?”

——*Just four more days, huh?*

The observation of Alley’s Comet was a big event for Shaher’s staff. For comet of long cycles, only people born within their visiting periods are able to see them. It was a miraculous chance. However, though the comet occupied Leon’s mind, so did Violet.

Ever since she had come, after each day of work, he would count the remaining hours he would spend with her. At the break of dawn, he would find himself thinking on and on about things such as what to say when approaching her, or why she would always be missing during lunchtime. And that would ease the stinging pain in his chest.

“Back to my topic… it’s fruitless no matter how much you like her. She’s an Auto-Memories Doll. She’ll soon disappear somewhere. Well, women are normally like that, though. When you think things are doing fine, before you realize it, they’re filing a letter of divorce and it’s over. Then they get mad like, ‘I have been holding back about it all this time’ and leave. It’s just a matter of not holding things in and talking about them.”

——*I don’t want… to become attached to her in that way. I don’t want to. I don’t want to.*

He shook his head in attempt to stop thinking about her and failing. As though to admonish himself, Leon intentionally fastened the tie even tighter. It was as if his neck was about to twist. But in truth, it had been hard to breathe for a long while now – ever since meeting Violet.

It was customary in Shaher for everyone to halt their activities during lunch period. Director Rubellie would say that it was for the sake of their work quality.

Within the Shaher headquarters was a cafeteria that could accommodate not only the visitors but also the entire staff of every department. There were meals that could be bought and take-outs. It was a free space. Leon would usually be at said cafeteria, but today, he had refused his colleagues invitation to sit together, walking around the halls after getting himself nothing but a bacon and lettuce baguette and a drink.

——*Where's she?*

He found the person in question without much trouble. There was a balcony that could be accessed through the hardly-used emergency stairs. A statue of a star goddess majestically stood on the stone handrail. Violet sat on the rail as though nestling on said goddess. With her drink on one hand, she fed bits of her bread to the birds. Her brightly shining golden hair emitted a soft glow and made her look even more God-like.

The birds flew off once Leon opened the door. "Do you… hate being seen while eating?"

As though having taken notice of his footsteps, without being startled at all, Violet nodded.

Leon moved closer, sitting by her side. "Why?" he inquired, biting into the baguette.

Violet averted her eyes, as if deep in thought. "When I'm eating or sleeping, I'm defenseless. I can't properly react if an enemy attacks."

“‘Enemy’, you say… even if you’re a woman traveling alone, do things that dangerous really happen?”

“It’s just a habit. I was a soldier in the past.”

“Hah? You?”

“Yes. Is that strange?”

Leon flinched as Violet slowly moved her neck to look at him. As her eyes met his sea green hair, they narrowed slightly at the excess of brightness.

“I-It is… I mean, you… no matter how you look at it… you’re just a woman.”

“‘Just’…?”

During work, he had come to find out that her arms were prosthetics. He had thought they could have been the result of some accident, but after being told she had been a soldier, he understood everything. Continentally speaking, disabled veterans were not a rarity. There had been a war going on between big countries called the Continental War until a few years before. But even after having heard that revelation, Leon, who knew nothing of Violet’s past, could only see her current self.

“You’re… just a woman…”

For him, the **first** ‘woman’.

Once again, Violet had a thoughtful expression for a moment. “Master is one of a kind.”

“Eh, how so?”

“Wherever I go, I am generally told that I am odd.”

“Isn’t that because of your clothes? They’re fluttery and seem hard to move around with.”

“Isn’t Master’s academic dress even harder to move around with?”

“It is. There are people that don’t even wear anything under those things during summer. Because they get moldy.”

“It would be terrible if there were wind blowing in these occasions.” As she commented seriously, Leon ended up smiling. “By the way, Master, did you have anything to talk about?”

“Y-Yeah… it’s nothing much, though. On your last day here, Alley’s Comet is coming. And, hum… it’s gonna be a really big deal, so I came to tell you about it…”

“Alley’s Comet is… the one mentioned in that manuscript, right?”

“That’s right. It’s got a 200-year cycle, so we won’t be able to see it again in this lifetime. Then, want to see it?” while asking, Leon internally prayed that she would somehow say yes.

“Yes, I would like to see it.” Violet nodded.

Leon balled a fist, crushing the baguette he had been holding. “Is that so? I guess it’s a given since we’re partners. There was no need to invite you.”

“Are you making an invitation or not?”

“I-I will! I am! You’re invited. The observation is before dawn so we’ll start getting ready at two o’clock. You’ll probably be sleepy by the time you have to leave, is that okay?”

“No problem. Just two hours of sleep is enough for me.”

“Get more than that… I understand. You just have to wait for the day to come. We’ll be the ones to prepare anything that might be of need. See ya. Sorry for intruding.” Getting down from the rail, Leon walked away.

After turning a few corners in the corridor, he leaned his back against a wall and squatted down on the spot. Cheeks stained crimson, sweat traveled down his forehead. As a hand made its way to his lips, and he

realized he was grinning. Violet's response of "yes, I would like to see it" replayed on repeat in his head.

"Fu… fuha… fuhaha…" it was good that there was no one around as he burst out in laughter, abruptly returning to himself after a few seconds. He got up in a hurry, straightening his clothes and wiping the sweat off. "I'm… this is weird… what is this…?" still not knowing the name of his peculiar disease, Leon let out a miserable voice and covered his face with both hands.

Violet, whom he had left behind, was watching whatever had happened to the baguette forgotten on the railing.

The Eustitia Observatory was equipped with a huge astronomical telescope, considered the world's largest. Other than it, the Observatory had countless smaller telescopes that could be borrowed and set up. Since the place was the best celestial bodies' observation spot in Eustitia, one could view the sky from anywhere they preferred, as it would make no difference so long as they had the right tools. In the dead of night, still too dark to properly see anything, Leon met up with Violet after gathering the telescope pieces, along with blankets for two and a few other items.

"Master, I'll carry these."

"It's fine."

"But… they look heavy."

"It's fine!"

Violet walked behind Leon, away from the stone-made cityscape. Although it was a warm season, in a city located within mountains, the coldness was still enough to prickle one's skin during nighttime. To add up, they both headed farther above into the mount. Once they arrived at the desired place, their bodies were utterly frigid.

"Here, cover yourself with this. And drink the soup. I'll put up the telescope."

Other observers could be seen here and there at the spot Leon had chosen. At a glimpse, it looked like a spacious open field, but just a little ahead was a precipitous cliff. Still, there were no obstacles in anyone's field of vision, and the large trees in the surroundings created good resistance against the wind. It was the best day for a star to come back after 200 years.

"Master, is that Alley's Comet?" Violet asked upon sighting a small lump of light in the sky.

"It'll look even more beautiful in a few. The closer the comet gets to the Sun, the more it evaporates from the heat, and that's what creates its tail and makes it take the form of what people call a 'shooting star'. The times when it's visible are either when the Sun is setting in the west or right before it rises in the east. It'll take some time but it's worth the wait. Here, sit."

Violet was gradually encircled by the things Leon had brought – a mat that had grown weary from usage, cushions that could withstand being sat on for long hours, a soft and lukewarm blanket and a delicious soup that warmed up the body from inside out.

"You still cold? Women get chilly so easily that it's a pain. Want one more layer? Put it on."

Although he had a brute way of speaking, he was a caring boy.

"Master is… very kind." Violet whispered at the same time as he talked.

"D-Don't spout nonsense. I'm not kind. And I'm no good with women. I treat them with disdain."

"Is that so? It seems to me that you are very gentle. It does look like Master does not hold conversations with female staff members, though…"

He looked like he had no interest in others.

“Sincerely, I hate women…” After blurting it out, he wound up looking for Violet’s reaction. She merely waited for him to continue. “I-It’s not… like I hate all of them… it’s just that this is like a curse… no matter what, whenever women are around, it ends up being bad for me in some way. I know… that there are good women out there.”

“Has a woman ever… done something malicious to you?”

The answer to Violet’s question was a scar in Leon’s heart that he had not shared even with his colleagues.

——*She will… be gone soon, anyways. No matter what I say, we’ll never meet again afterwards. So isn’t it okay… if I become honest in front of someone for once in my life?*

Leon thought while looking into the eyes of that beautiful woman. Luckily, she was a straight-laced taciturn. She would definitely not go on gossiping about the past of a young man that she had met in the mountains. Even if she did, the damage that could cause would be minimal.

“Can you promise me… you won’t tell this to anyone?” Leon, who could not open up without such precaution, let go of the telescope that he had just finished setting up and firmly held onto her two hands.

“As you wish.”

His own hands, which had been gelid from the nightly wind, were now tense and sweaty in the peak of his nervousness. “I… I was… I was born and raised in this city. You… heard a lot about it back in the library, right?”

“You were listening…?”

“I was. It’s just as they said. My mother was a wanderer, a gypsy. Do you know what gypsies are? They’re people that visit many places and do performances, like dancing, singing, and crafting, thus promoting their own works… they’re similar to you, Auto-Memories Dolls.” while speaking, Leon started to reminisce to the parent that was no longer

around. “Most gypsies are free-spirited women. There are those who hook up with men wherever they go, and those that fall head over hills and chase after one. They’re normally one of these two types. My mother was no exception to this, and fell in love with a man from this city, giving birth to a child. That was me.”

Leon’s mother had told him about how green was an extremely rare color for hair. It was a mutation born from an abrupt genetic mixture of multiple races. That was why he was so special and precious, she used to say – because he was the result of love between so many people. His mother had flaxen hair that had always smelled sweet. Since she had lived without ever dyeing it despite being teased for it, her words held great weight. No matter how much it was seen as bizarre, she had never stopped seeing it as a blessing.

He actually did not have many memories about his father, who was often not home. He worked at Shaher’s literature collection department. He had a grizzly beard and slump shoulders. It could not be said with just one look that he was a good person, but Leon’s mother was completely in love with him.

“Mom got my father to marry her by asking him directly.” His words sounded dark, but it was the truth.

He did not understand why his stunning mother had fallen for a reserved man that spent most of his time looking at stars. Similarly, he did not understand why his father had accepted her. Only, the two always seemed to get along well. Whenever his father would hear his mother cheerfully singing while reading his newspaper on the sofa, he would invite her to dance with him, force himself to get up and execute the steps poorly, without ever being rough to her. Their child would be reading picture books of stars nearby, listening to their laughter from behind his back. Such was their life.

He believed they were a good family.

It was said that the relationship between married couples often sullied due to issues with their children, but in their household, there was no such

thing. After all, the object of his mother's affection was primarily his father, and he was nothing more than the outcome of it. That was why it was obvious that his mother would leave in pursue of his father when he did not return from a search for literary collections.

When she contacted the literature collection department, she was told he had gone to abandoned ruins that used to be the base of an ancient kingdom. The underground empire had collapsed due to famine after the magnificent forest above it was destroyed by consecutive natural disasters. As it had turned into an abandoned graveyard, it was occupied by wild beasts and thieves.

It was rumored everywhere that whoever entered the site was cursed to never come back alive, yet the task of finding out the truth behind six researchers that had vanished without even their corpses being left behind was too important to ignore. However, in the end, the ones that had left with such purpose had returned without any clue on the whereabouts of the first group.

The literature collection department staff were explorers, and perishing during their journeys was not uncommon. Leon's mother had been prepared for it to happen when marrying his father, but accepting it and being able to bear it were two different things. Her son or her dearest husband – putting both on a balance, she eventually had chosen which she loved most.

The last time he saw her was her back opening the door of their house with full intent to venture into a world overflowing with light. Before doing so, she had silently packed her luggage, handled Leon enough money for a few months and enough food for a few weeks, and told him about adults that he could rely on if anything happened, throwing away her role as mother after patting him on the head once. The moment she had suddenly turned around, she was simply a woman going after her husband. Hers was the silhouette of someone that had been baptized by people who spoke lightly of love.

During that time, of course, he had been sad for being abandoned by his mother. The hardest part was being ignored after having called out for his

mother with a small and tearful voice, as if pleading. Although his mother had supposedly heard him, she had opened the door without hesitation.

“I’ll come back soon.” She left him with a cruel lie in exchange of a farewell and disappeared, not coming back even once ever since.

——*Surely, the times the three of us had together will never return either.*

Had she planned to leave her child and run off somewhere? Or maybe – it was the conclusion he was the least fond of imagining – she who had lived for love could have died for it. And Leon hated himself for still wanting to be keeping watch on that door even now.

——*Women are selfish… they soon become obsessed with romance and love without thinking about the trouble they cause to others around them. If things are good for them, they don’t care about anything else. Love is what causes fools of that sort to be looked down upon by people. Is it okay for a parent to do something like that?*

Where were his infant self’s feelings supposed to go? What was right and what was wrong? As the sight from his memories kept replaying in his head, so did the questions of “why?” and “how?”, several hundreds of million times. How were the wounds from losing that person and from reaching his hand out to the past supposed to heal?

For his young self, that person was his entire world. He would never have thought she would be gone one day. If she were not already there from the start, at the very least, she was his outright guardian from the moment he was born until he became aware of the things around him. She would find him whenever he ran off crying and praise him whenever he did something good. If he reached out his hand, she would even embrace him. She was a grand existence, better than him at everything.

——*Take my hand. Otherwise, I can’t walk. Look at me. I can’t live without being watched over by you. Don’t go anywhere. This responsibility is upon you.*

Such was what a parent was supposed to be.

——*That's what I used to think.*

After finishing revealing his personal history, Leon rubbed his chest upon feeling his heartbeats intensify. Even though he had merely talked about the past, his heart reacted candidly, which affected his entire body.

——*I'm an idiot, even though I'm not a child anymore.*

He had had an unfulfilling childhood, but it was not as if he had never been fortunate. Shaher's foundation had taken him as an orphan in after being notified that he had been abandoned and his relatives were gone, unfalteringly raising him until he was able to become an independent citizen of Eustitia. He later managed to get the great job of his dreams. He was fully aware that holding an eternal grudge towards his mother for leaving him was irrational. Even so…

——*Even so, my sad past will not disappear.*

In order to even the heartbeats, Leon sucked in a deep breath. Violet sat mutely by his side. The wind blew past the area, shaking the trees with its strokes. The cries of insects resounded softly, the sky filled with countless stars and one comet. Perhaps that had not been the best topic to discuss during such an ideal night.

Violet's once quiet rose-colored lips opened unexpectedly, "Master… your honorable mother was very important to you, right?" She spoke in an awfully casual manner, yet the way she had pronounced 'important' sounded as if it had been borrowed from somewhere. Her words did not seem to have her real feelings properly imprinted in them.

Leon gazed at Violet. "I'm not really… sure about it anymore, but that probably used to be true. I must have felt this way before since she was my family… What about yours?"

"I have no blood-relation family. I'd been in the military since I was little, and the kind of family Master is asking about… I feel that I finally have a vague idea of it by now. Only… there was someone who took me in when I was a child." Violet turned to look at Leon, who had never left the

mountains, with her ocean-blue eyes. Her gaze while staring at his green hair, which was said to be the result of a wonderful love, was exceptionally solemn for some reason.

“Don’t you feel lonely being apart from that person?”

For a second, all of Violet’s movements stopped completely. Her pupils shook relentlessly, indicating she was at loss. A hand unwittingly reached for her emerald brooch. “To say this… could be seen as disqualifying of me as a doll. However, to tell the truth, I cannot comprehend… feelings such as loneliness, sorrow or love. I know what those feelings are. Except, I do not know if I myself can feel them. This is not a lie. I really do not know… still, just by not knowing this, it could be… that now, I may indeed be lonely.”

He might have denied those words had they been said by someone else. However, there was a taste of verity in the way that enigmatic woman spoke. It was as if the beautiful Auto-Memories Doll had the body and mind of a puppet. Nevertheless, Leon engraved her baffling words in his mind.

In the darkness of the night, Violet appeared smaller than during daytime. Although she looked like a doll, she was not really one. She was a genuine human being; a girl wrapped in a blanket.

“You… dedicate yourself to your job too much. Even if you call yourself an Auto-Memories Doll, you’re a normal woman through and through. Not a doll. You’re definitely… supposed to be lonely. Even I have times when I feel alone. R-Really rare times, though… Don’t you… occasionally think about this person?”

“I do.”

“Doesn’t your heart hurt like hell when you spent too many days away from them?”

“It does.”

“Won’t you feel lighter when you see them again?”

Violet closed her eyes, her long lashes meeting. Perhaps she was thinking about the person in question. Eventually, her blue orbs opened widely. “It seems I will.”

At her reaction that was so much like a child’s, Leon burst out laughing, “Haha, you… don’t you actually just have a low mental age? That’s the feeling I get when you speak.”

“Is that so? Do I not understand things… because I’m too much of a child?”

“Who knows? It’s something that can only be known by gut feeling. And about your person… how are they doing now?”

Violet was taken aback and lost her words for a moment. “We are apart at the moment, but I always feel as if I’m by that person’s side.”

It was a roundabout answer. The way Violet spoke of her benefactor caused Leon to imagine an old man as her legal guardian. He was surely a strict person to raise a woman such as her.

“You… if you heard that this person got in a dangerous situation at the other side of the world… while you were still in your contract period with me, what would you do? You wouldn’t know if you’d be able to save him even if you went to where he was. You could die. In a situation like this, would you abandon work and go to him?”

The interrogation could have been a bit harsh. It was obvious that she would go save someone who was like a parent to her, yet Leon had created feeble expectations. Regardless, Violet only blinked in silence.

“Sorry. That was my bad. I asked something weird. It’s troublesome to answer, right?”

“No, that’s not it. On the contrary.” Violet replied, rubbing her chest just as Leon had been doing earlier. “No response other than going off to save him

comes to me, and I keep thinking about how I would apologize to Master… Abandoning a mission is unpermitted, but I'm certain I would leave to save that person. I would consent to any manner of vilification and punishment afterwards. For me, that person is practically the world itself to me… if he passed away, I would rather be dead."

Leon lost his voice, mouth agape at the answer that had come out so smoothly.

"Master?"

"Ah, it's nothing… just… you don't seem like the kind of person to say things like that… i-it surprised me."

"Is that so? I don't understand myself that well."

"No… hum…"

"Master, forgive me for interrupting. That comet… I feel its tail is becoming very big."

Upon being told that, Leon violently snapped his neck to look up. High in a world of utter darkness, something grand shone brightly. The illusion-like ball of light cut through the skies with a long tail that stretched out in a weak glow. Its radiant form was an emissary of light that shattered the world of night.

It could be seen with just a glance that all present feared the existence so-called a comet, for everyone, same as when falling in love, had forgotten to blink or breathe. The cryptic thief above stole everything, even emotions and time – such was the charm of the bodies that resided beyond the sky. As Leon hurried to take a peek into the telescope, he was able to confirm that as the entity they had been anticipating so much.

"Violet! You take a look too." Oblivious of what they had just talked about, Leon was overwhelmed by the comet's splendor.

Violet changed places with him and took a peek as well. Her mouth opened slightly with a gasp of admiration. “It’s my first time seeing a star so up close.”

“It’s not a star! It’s a comet! Are you looking properly? This is a once-in-200-years thing! We’ll never see it again! This is a one-time… a one-time encounter!”

“Yes, I can see it. It’s marvelous… things this beautiful actually exist.”

“That’s right! Amazing, isn’t it?! That’s why astronomical research is so great!”

Sounds of laughter and of wine bottles being opened could be heard in the surroundings. Even staff members they did not know celebrated the comet together. Violet let go of the telescope, surveying the sky and the space she currently found herself in. Underneath the heavens of right before sunrise, over the mountains enclosed in silence, people simply enjoyed the moment with one another to their hearts’ contentment. The wanderer Auto-Memories Doll narrowed her eyes lightly at the scene.

“Are you smiling right now?”

Lingering on the sight of the comet, without really answering the question, Violet replied with a newly-found lively voice, “Master, astronomical observations are truly superb, are they not?”

The once-in-200-years night went on magnificent and gracefully.

In the noon subsequent to Alley’s Comet’s observation, Leon accompanied Violet to the ropeway, after requesting Rubellie in advance for a quick break. They had had intermittent conversations the previous day, yet now both were completely mute.

The ropeway slowly ascended from bellow. Once it arrived, he would definitely never see her again. Yet Leon did nothing but rub his chest. It ached excruciatingly. A dull pain seemed to pierce through him, on and off.

“Master, thank you very much for helping with the luggage. I can carry it by myself from here.”

Even as Violet said so, he found himself unable to hand over the trolley bag. She tilted her head at him.

“Hey, you… you…” Leon begun hoarsely. He could tell his face was growingly reddening.

He did not even know what exactly he wanted to say. If she were a man and the two of them had built a friendship over time, he could easily tell her to come visit him again. But she was the woman that he was supposed to detest and had become hopelessly attached to instead.

The woman named Violet differed from any other he had ever met. The feelings he harbored for her were also different from the very start. He had never learned a way of saying goodbye to someone like her.

——*If mom… were still around, would I have copied it from her?*

It was a bad habit of Leon’s to associate the loss of his mother with anything. While he had not even opened his mouth yet, the ropeway arrived.

“Master, it seems it’s time. Even for a short while, thank you for taking care of me.”

“Ah, no…” he wavered too much to say what really mattered. Various feelings swirled messily within Leon’s mind. Sorrow, frustration, resentment, and a hint of relief instead of anger.

As he silently passed the trolley bag to her, Violet bowed courteously in gratitude. She then turned on her heels and walked away from him.

——*We won’t… ever meet again.*

The white pleats of her skirt swayed, her ribbon wobbled, her boots made a light sound.

——*I'll… no longer be able to look at her.*

Her eyes of sea-blue, lips of ruby and hair of gold were things he had only ever seen in books.

——*I'll… never see her again.*

The emptiness of his past self being left behind with the click of a closing door assaulted his body even now.

——*I… don't want to just keep waiting for her here…!*

When Leon realized, he had grabbed Violet's shoulders just before she was gone and forced her to face him.

"Master?" Her gem-like orbs reflected his features wretchedly distorted in bitterness.

"Violet…" A bit of strength naturally came to his hands as he held onto her. The prosthetic arms emitted a sharp noise, which merged with his own heartbeats.

——*Have courage… for once in your life!*

The first person he had ever wished to welcome into his heart was an Auto-Memories Doll, a former soldier, and an absolute beauty. Perhaps she was a bad match for him. But it was exactly because she was the way she was that he had become fond of her.

——*This love that I absolutely couldn't muster out of my mouth…*

"Violet, I know it will trouble you if I say something like this, but… I want to say it now."

——*…my heart, my emotions, and myself… to hell with it all.*

"I like you."

——*To hell with it all.*

“I’ve come to like you. In the romantic sense.”

It was much better than having to bear the loneliness of keeping it to himself forever.

Silence ensued between the two. Regret slowly begun to burn within Leon’s whole being from his feet up. She was troubled. That was clear.

——*If possible… I had wanted to bid my farewells… without being hated.*

With that, was he going to become one more of the numerous men that had hit on her?

“Master…” Violet’s time seemed to move slower due to the surprise attack. “Master… I…” despite generally having a calm composure, her voice jammed unusually.

——*What’s wrong? Dump me.*

She had to deal with flirting from so many men during her stay. It was probably the same wherever she went. It would be fine if she just used her aloof doll-like attitude as always.

“I…”

Yet Violet did not do so. Her gaze loitered around, turned to Leon, then to her own hands, and finally, she clutched her emerald brooch. As if confirming the existence of something, she grasped it tightly.

“I… when Master showed the stars to me, I thought, ‘moments as wonderful as these really do happen’. That was the feeling I had.” Her tone was different from usual. “I’m sure that was what ‘having fun’ is, and I’m extremely thankful to Master for giving it to me.”

The woman named Violet Evergarden was almost like an inorganic doll, an unattainable flower.

“I had the flighty feeling… that I was being treated as a normal girl.”

She was the sort of woman that would say she did not quite understand feelings, then splint off somewhere.

“However…”

Regardless, in reality, that was definitely not true.

“I do not feel as if I want to be with Master in such way. As Master had described, I am a child… inexperienced as a human being… with no idea if I will ever fall in love from hereafter. I’m that kind of woman. Still, if we ever meet again, I wish to spend time with you like this once more. The way I want to do it might be unlike yours, but that is what I am thinking.” Violet affirmed strongly, “It’s the truth.”

Leon exhaled with an “aah”. His head drooped deeply. “Is that so…?”

It was a much better rejection than he had pictured. He could remain without crying due to his high level of self-respect as well.

“My apologies…”

Upon being asked for forgiveness, Leon shook his head slightly as to not let the tears come out. “You’re not guilty of anything. I’m… the one at fault. I got on the way of your departure.”

“No.”

“I caused you trouble.”

“No, there was no such thing. I… right now, I am surely…”

Violet apparently attempted to say something tremendously important. Presuming so, Leon forced his eyes, thinly tapered in-between his waterlines, to look at her. Before his blurry vision was his first love.

“…at this moment…”

Standing right there.

“…I believe I am very ‘happy’.”

With the expression of a girl of the same age as himself, which still retained some childishness.

——*What, so you have feelings after all?*

He felt like laughing, but it seemed his tears would pour down if he did so. She who had from start to end not showed much emotion had done that to

him. Even so, was it not all right that way? His slanted heart could stand up again.

“Violet.”

“Yes?”

“I… I… I’m part of the manuscripts department right now, but… the truth is that I wanted to be in the literature collection one, like my father.”

Violet listened without dismissal to the sudden, odd topic.

“I’d been hoping that my mother would come back with him if I waited here… and shut myself in here without exploring the world until I’ve become this old. That was possible staying in this place, so I kept wishing for it. But… now…” speaking inarticulately, Leon somehow managed to push on, “now, I’ve made my mind. I will go around the world like you.”

As reflected in Violet’s eyes, he was not cool in the slightest.

It was embarrassing to show such a side of his character to a lady. That part of him was not really himself. While thinking so, he continued to spill the words out, “I might get involved in dangerous things. Maybe I’ll lose my life without even my corpse left behind like my parents. But… but… it’s fine. I think I’ll choose that path.”

Violet accepted his words with no nitpicking. “Yes.”

Leon’s chest creaked at her earnest reply. “And then, someday, for sure, we might encounter each other again under the night sky somewhere. We’re fellow gypsies. When this happens, will you…”

——*…see the stars with me again?*

Before Leon finished, Violet nodded widely. “Yes, Master.” Her eyes narrowed the same way as when commenting on how wonderful things had been.

The insides of Leon's once intensely throbbing chest felt instantly amended as he stared at that which would normally not be considered a smile. Nothing hurt anymore.

"I will be looking forward to it."

He did not feel any more sadness.

——*What… so that time, too…*

Albeit the fact that they had to bid farewell to each other could not change, he should have made that person turn around, even if forcibly. He had considerably regretted his lack of initiative for a long time.

Leon took some distance from Violet. Just before the door closed, she whispered in a clear voice, "Master, I work for the C.H. Postal Agency. I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might wish for. However, at night, when everyone is asleep, I am, as you put it, just a woman. Just Violet Evergarden. If you ever see me someday beneath the starry skies, please do call out for me. Until then, I will try to memorize the names of at least a few stars."

As soon as the door closed with a crack, the ropeway began to descend. The hand that had been holding onto Leon's chest moved about in the air as he waved awkwardly. Violet returned it lightly.

When her figure was no more than a speck in the distance, Leon walked away from the ropeway's platform and headed for his workplace. As he did so, he was deep in thought. The other Auto-Memories Doll whom Violet had been replacing would arrive that afternoon. They had a pile of work to do.

His transference request would not be answered anytime soon. For starters, once he ventured himself in the outside world, he and Violet meeting someplace the way she had described and the way he wanted to was a sidereal possibility, as uncommon as a comet that passed by once in every 200 years. Even so, he felt no dread, only exaltation. He would surely no longer despise anyone for closing a door with their back turned to him.

Such was the result of making a promise to that woman.

On a certain night some time after that day, under the starry sky in a deserted land he did not even know the name of, a wandering scholar spotted a person with golden hair that sparkled in the moonlight. As he hesitantly called out to her, she turned around and murmured with a clear voice, “It has been a while.”

He had dreamt of this day, always thinking of what to say if they ever saw each other again. If they met under a cloudless night sky, they could talk about its beauty. If it were on a rainy day, they could talk about myths related to stars. If it were a day like the one in which the 200-year comet had come by, they could talk about the past where they had watched it together. Nevertheless, no matter how far ahead such occasion was or how much he would change until then, he was aware that the feelings he harbored for that person would not budge.

“Have you memorized the names of at least a few stars?”

What came out of his mouth was a different line from the ones he had planned beforehand, but the person nodded, as if very happy. That spontaneous, natural reaction came from someone who had once claimed not to understand feelings. It such a simple act, yet it caused the insides of his chest to overflow with an insufferable amount of affection, as well as a vexing pain.

“Violet, you…”

Leon pointed his index finger toward the heavens. In the deserted night sky, a brilliance akin to that of a jewel shone dazzlingly, very fitting for a reunion day.

——*Let’s leave aside the fact that I still love you. For now, just…*

“…if you have time to spare, won’t you spend it with me?” he asked the young woman and the starry sky.

Chapter 5: The Prisoner and the Auto-Memories Doll

Ashen snow danced about nimbly. It all started with a single flake, then many flocking together and eventually covering the ground. For villages that had not prepared for colder periods, for travelers crossing highways on foot, and for fields and mountains where vestiges of autumn still lingered, the manifestations of winter made its power known.

Why did the four seasons exist? There was no one that could possibly answer such question, yet it was unquestionable that said seasons were

necessary as they repeatedly regulated life and death, as well as assisted the world's cycle so that it would not be delayed.

In the middle of a certain battlefield, a girl observed the sky. As the white, cold substance slowly floated down, the girl asked the lord beside her, "What is that?"

"That's snow, Violet." taking off his gloves that smelled of gunpowder smoke, the lord held an open hand in front of her. A flake descended onto it and soon liquefied.

The girl let out a breath at the oddness of the sight. For the first time, she attempted saying the name of the substance that had dissolved in her lord's hand, "Snow…" Hers was the intonation of a small infant that had just started to learn words.

"That's right, 'snow'."

"Is there… a type of snow that melts… and one that doesn't?" the girl turned towards a corpse on the ground that still held onto a weapon. Snow amassed over it like a coat of powdered sugar.

There was not only one dead body. Around the area the two found themselves in, countless soldiers' bodies were all over the frigid soil, as if they had been abandoned there without so much as graves to reside in.

"The one on Major's hand melted. The one on those corpses… did not." she pointed at them with the battle axe in her hand.

Making no comment on her lighthearted attitude towards the deceased, the lord merely lowered the weapon down. "Snow fluxes when it touches warm things. When it falls onto cold things, it merely piles up. Give me your hand."

The girl did exactly as told. As the lord removed her glove, which was of the same color as his own, her pale hand was exposed. Snow fell onto her porcelain-like skin as well, turning into water. For a second, the girl whose doll-like face lacked emotion widened her eyes.

“It melted…” She exhaled again with a “hooh”.

One could not discern the expression on the lord’s look as he watched her reaction from the side. He seemed just as aloof. Once he wiped the droplet on her hand with a finger, he said, “As it evidently would.”

“Is that so? I thought… it might not melt on my hand.”

The envoys of ice that cascaded from the sky continuously touched the girl’s hand and the lord’s one that grasped it, melting onto the two palms of different sizes.

“So I, too, am warm.” The girl stated the obvious with the tone of someone that had just witnessed a miracle.

“You’re… alive. That’s why you’re warm.”

“But… I was often told that… I seem to be made of ice.”

“By whom?”

“Well… they might be amongst those that perished…”

With just a glance, it could be noted that, amongst the heaps of corpses lying around the prairie, some wore the same uniform as the girl and the lord. The girl displayed no signs of sorrow or pain at that fact. Winter wind blew strongly in the space between the two of them with a whistle.

“From now on, report to me whenever you are insulted.”

Surely, the girl had not thought of it as an insult. Even now, it seemed she had not completely understood what exactly she was supposed to report, but nodded earnestly, then stared at the lord’s face the same way she had observed the snow melt. Upon noticing some of it accumulating on his shoulders, she automatically stretched a hand to dust it off.

“Snow… erases other colors when it piles up, doesn’t it?”

The lord caught her hand, putting the glove back on it. “Yes. Not just colors, but also sounds.”

The girl’s hand gradually grew warm. It was due to the heat granted from the glove. “Is that so?” She peeked into the emerald green orbs that meant everything to her. In them was reflected an expressionless, spectacularly beautiful girl soldier covered in blood. “If it snowed… in the whole world…” the girl paused for a moment, “it would become harder for people to kill each other.” She asked after examining the lord’s face, “Would that erase Major’s worries as well?”

“Violet,” the lord answered as though to lecture the innocent girl, “to erase something… means simply to hide it, not solve it.”

The Altair Prison was a facility built over a large piece of land, surrounded by an exceptionally tall fence and blanketed by grey skies. The current number of prisoners was of about 2,200. Approximately 400 staff members lived there, monitoring and guiding them towards rectification. It was claimed as the largest prison in the continent, but it was also commended for being so competently managed that not a single jailbreak had happened since its foundation.

The prison was located in a region named Cornwell at the northern part of the continent. It was an extremely cold territory, shrouded in snow all year round. The distances between cities were significant – even if one were able to leave the facility, it would take half a day by car to reach any neighboring town. Therefore, if a prisoner took as much as a step outside, nothing would be awaiting aside from the natural risk of a lonesome death by hypothermia. Regardless of how much one might want to escape, it could never be done easily, which was why the place was the most suitable possible for imprisonment.

Maintaining the facility in its best condition and rectifying its prisoners generated abundant capital. Entering from the main gate with high spires that towered over the surroundings, what could be seen was a factory divided into countless sections. It produced a huge variety of goods, most of them being manufactured ones consigned to private companies. It was a wide range of industrialization, from clothes to soap and detergents. The

prisoners had a diverse assortment of labor that was deemed as an economic activity necessary not only for the facility's preservation, but also for getting stable jobs in their return to society after the end of their sentence. Whatever the reason, it prominently contributed to lowering the prisoners' primary criminal aptitude as well. In fact, the number of prisoners in custody was actually small.

However, that applied solely to the first section, which housed those who committed low-level crimes. In the second, third and fourth, the control system over the prisoners was increasingly severe in accordance to their charges and the atrocities practiced by them, with no such thing as being given manual work, simply being supervised. Those who resided in these sections were considered too dangerous to be granted any form of work, regardless of what it was.

To house criminals that could absolutely not be allowed to run away was a given for any prison, but Altair had a plus of "no matter what", "definitely" and "unquestionably" to the word "absolutely". It was an individual that would cause an enormous impact on society if he ever, by any chance, managed to escape. Thus, he was kept hidden.

Those who entered the place were normally surprised at how impeccable it was. The thoroughly cleaned corridors' walls were decorated with replicas of famous paintings. It was an atmosphere that resembled the waiting room of a hospital.

No matter who came from the entryway, or what they wore, they would be announced right away, so the people sitting in rows on the benches of the waiting room would never have to wait for too long for interview procedures to start. The data written in detail about the ones they had come to see, the purpose of their visit, even their hospitalization records and presence or absence of medical history were lined up in lists, obligatorily registering everything about each visitor without omitting a single factor. Meanwhile, their identities would be confirmed with their ID cards being presented.

If no problems were found during the interview, meetings would be permitted afterwards in a room with compartments divided by thin walls,

which could accommodate a large amount of people. Bringing in food was also tolerable as long as it passed through examination. Pies were not recommended, as the contents of containers would be churned. After going through inspection, the visitors were finally allowed their meetings.

The fact that the people being visited were cherished by others did not change the reality that they had sinned. However, amongst the visitors, one had come strictly for work. A lone Auto-Memories Doll was dispatched to the prison standing firm and silently in a world of resilient silver snow. Receiving special treatment as a visitor, the woman was on stand-by in a private room. It was a room for important people, who were allowed past the inspection period.

She looked as if a prison was not suitable for her. Her blue irises that resembled star sapphires held a mysterious charm. The dark red ribbon wrapping her braided, outstanding golden hair that seemed to be enveloped in the gleam of constellations, and the emerald-green brooch clasped over the center of her Prussian-blue jacket that was no more than an accessory were her trademarks. Inside of her cocoa-brown knitted boots, her legs tilted diagonally in a lovely manner as she remained seated on a chair. She was a beauty that would not normally be found in the interior of a penitentiary, consistently stealing the gazes of every staff member in the silent room while undertaking her surveillance and escorting.

The young woman that did not make visible movements, much like a doll, flickered her eyes at the clock placed on one of the room’s walls. It seemed it would take some time and willpower for her to finally meet the one she had come to see. She displayed no hints of frustration towards that fact, but only a little while before, the air about her appeared to reveal unrest. A knock then echoed in the room with no sounds other than the ticktack of the clock’s needle and sighs of admiration for the woman’s attractiveness coming from the staff members.

“Miss Violet Evergarden, the preparations for the meeting have been completed.” A chubby woman with a hoarse voice called. Her dark green security uniform seemed a little too tight, the buttons almost jumping off on the chest area.

As the one named Violet stood up swiftly while grabbing her travel bag and stripped umbrella that had been left on the floor, one of the other female staff members widened her eyes with a somewhat astonished expression. It then morphed into one of jealously and envy at the person who had called for the name of the girl with slender built and stunning facial features. The staff member ogled at Violet with a stupidly dazed stare before glaring daggers at the one supposed to show her around. The latter then proceeded to guide Violet through an exclusive-use passage limited to authorized personnel.

“I’m Chaser. It’s just for a bit, but I’ll show you around.” Chaser’s thick voice echoed obnoxiously through the otherwise quiet corridors along with the clicking of hers and Violet’s shoe soles.

Outside the corridor’s windows, what could be seen was the growingly accumulating snow and the world of white covered in it.

“So… you’re famous in the amanuensis business, Violet Evergarden? I was shocked at this, but the protagonist of ‘Ice Rose Princess’ was based off of you, right? You know, that one stage play… by the scriptwriter Oscar… My colleague was really jealous of me just now because I’d be the one escorting you today. That tale is popular amongst Oscar’s fans, after all. I haven’t seen the play, but she commended it for the really good story.” Chaser talked on while peeking at Violet’s profile every now and then.

Violet merely nodded in assertion, not showing much sociability.

——*What’s with that? So pretentious. Besides… she might be pretty, but it’s too much and ends up being creepy.*

Chaser turned away with a blunt tongue click. It seemed that Violet’s well-structured appearance, which could be considered a cool beauty, was one of the determining factors of why her uncommunicativeness could sometimes hurt people. The other party would never guess the reason behind her scarce use of words.

In order to reach their destination, it was necessary to use the stairway. It seemed the one Violet was supposed to meet lived underground. Even without Violet asking why there were no elevators, Chaser explained it.

“Down there is… haah… full of criminals with really heavy charges and psychotic disorders… haah, haah… so, to diminish the number of escape routes in the unlikely case there’s ever a jailbreak, there are… only stairs. It’s a pain… for staff members… like me, though…”

Whether it was due to lack of exercise or an excess of weight, Chaser descended the stairs with much difficulty. As she sweated and wheezed, Violet glanced at her repeatedly with worry, and when it seemed she would slip, Violet reached her hand out to her. With a speed that could not be registered by human eyes, she grasped Chaser’s collar, holding her still in midair.

“Oeh… Ueh…” while choking, Chaser was overcome with fear as she confirmed that she was being lifted by the neck. “L-L-L-Let me dooown!”

Violet slowly put her in a position in which she would no longer miss a step, quietly whispering from behind her, “My apologies. Forgive me for the rough treatment, Young Lady.”

Chaser’s face was painted red at her striking voice. “D-Drop this ‘Young Lady’! I already have a husband and a child!”

“Is that so? Forgive me once again, Milady.”

“Ah, no, it’s not that…”

——*How rude of me, not expressing a single word of gratitude even though I was saved…*

“Then, Madam.”

“It’s not about the honorific!”

“It seems I have made you go through an unpleasant experience. Would you like to point out my gaffe? I will try to improve as much as possible.”

Chaser was dumbfounded. Were she in Violet's place, she would express how affronted she was with a closed-up face. However, Violet herself had no changes in attitude. Rather than being icy, Chaser realized, she was simply less impersonal.

"That's not it… I wanted to say it was my bad. Do you get it? I yelled at you even though you helped me out, and I am… heavy… so thank you." Chaser said with slightly pursed lips.

Violet shook her head. "A lady or two do not really count as weighty. Compared to a tank, you are like a feather."

"What kind of comparison is that? You could lift me pretty easily with that tiny body of yours… you have a lot of strength. What a weird Auto-Memories Doll. Also… do you act like that with everyone?"

"I have always been… stronger than normal people. This partly has to do with my prosthetics. This was made by Estark Inc., so the durability level is quite high. It's possible to use force and movements that normally cannot be achieved by a human body, so it's extremely convenient. But by 'act like that', you mean…?"

As Violet removed one of her black gloves without hesitation, Chaser was a little skeptical, yet convinced herself that there must have been circumstances regarding the matter and answered without prying any further, "Like, you know… speaking with people as if they're nobility. Well, it does seem like your business has a lot of rich clients, so it must be your operating standard…"

"I have used formal speech with everyone since forever. However, if my words have made you uncomfortable, I apologize."

"I didn't think of it as unpleasant, just surprising. But I was… well, a little happy. I'm usually not referred to as 'Young Lady' because of my age."

"Is that so?"

In that instant, for the first time, Chaser noticed a bit of facial manifestation in Violet. It was a faint resemblance of what could or not be called a smile.

“A certain someone… taught me how to speak as politely as I do now. Being praised for it is an honor… because I consider the things I learned a treasure.”

At the glimpse of Violet’s humane side, Chaser could feel her annoyance subsiding a little.

“Let’s move on slowly. It would be terrible if Madam slipped again.”

“You don’t need to use such an imposing honorific on me. Just ‘Chaser’ is fine.”

“Lady Chaser.”

“‘Chaser’!”

After being corrected with a reprehending tone, Violet blinked a few times and tested the name on her tongue, “Chaser… then, please just call me Violet as well.”

Chaser’s breath unwittingly caught in her throat at Violet’s expression and gestures, which could make one want to paint a portrait of her.

——*Being referred to without formalities by this woman… gives off an unexpectedly special feeling.*

With her stomach tickling slightly, Chaser replied, “That’s better.”

Descending the entire stairway took quite a while. Once they finally arrived at its end, the two found themselves in yet another corridor. It had enough space for about two horse carriages to easily pass through at once. The walls were filled with room doors that had small windows to peek from. Each room was supplied with the exact same furnishing, the sole difference between them being the people inside. There were old men, young girls, and even small children. Everyone wore the same white-and-

black jumpsuit – the uniform of a prisoner. It was impossible to believe right away that all of them had felony charges, for they led quiet lifestyles, not particularly causing any ruckus.

“Astounding, isn’t it? Doesn’t it remind you much more of a mental hospital?” As Violet nodded silently, Chaser went on, “There are some guys here without **any** sense of guilt. In normal circumstances, you’d actually think they’re regular people. Even I have thought that when I first came here. Well, when they speak, you can tell little by little that they’re crazy, but on the outside, they’re no different from ordinary humans. Scary, huh?” Chaser laughed.

“Yes, that is right.”

Chaser failed to hear what exactly Violet’s statement agreed with, for the two of them had just stopped in front of the last room.

“We’re here. It’s the cell your client is in. The suite this king of crime is staying in our ‘hotel’.”

Two guards stood by each side of the door without hiding their guns. The sturdy men seemed stunned upon looking at Violet’s beauty, but did not take long to return to their stern positions without unbecomingly losing their composure.

“From this point on, you can only keep authorized items with yourself. Since there’s a possibility that he could steal something and try to use it as weapon. Of course, we’d restrain him, but we can’t give him a single opening. Or else, you might be influenced by his persuasiveness. We normally don’t allow people to bring even pens in, but… that would make your work impossible. Please leave with us everything that is sharp or could be a potential weapon… aside from your work tools.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, everything.”

Being told so by the guards, Violet was thoughtful for a moment, before responding with an “all right” and handing over her luggage. Her umbrella was her travel comrade along with her worn-out trolley bag. The guard that received them staggered a bit at the bag’s weight. She then deliberately took off her cocoa-brown boots and peeled their insoles, pulling knives from within them.

“Hey, what were the inspectors doing during her turn?” one of them grumbled.

As she also took off her Prussian-blue jacket and inversed it, she pulled a handgun out of the puffed sleeve. Next, she rolled her skirt up just a little. A garter belt with spare bullets was fastened around her tight, and upon reaching further up with her hand, she took out a holster with a ballistic knife as well. Lastly, she raised her hands towards her diligent and complexly braided golden hair. Said braid was rolled into a bun and ended on the dark red ribbon that decorated it, and from that spot was where Violet swiftly took out one thin, needle-like golden object. Then two, then three.

“What… do you use these for?” Chaser inquired, terrified by Violet’s hidden weapons.

“They’re concealed devices used for piercing the carotid artery.”

All present, with the exception of Violet, sucked in a breath.

“What… are you?”

“Rather than being for frequent use, they’re for protection. I hear it’s unsafe for women to travel alone. Still, I am nothing other than the amanuensis Violet Evergarden.” She said as though proclaiming, merely taking a fountain pen and a letter set that shone silver from the trolley bag.

“Are there really… no more weapons?”

Being asked for confirmation, Violet seemed thoughtful once again before nodding. “None. The sole thing left is the fact that I myself am a living

weapon, yet I cannot do my job if I am not allowed to pass, so is this all right?”

That could have been a joke. However, after having seen the hidden weapons, no one laughed.

The lock was removed and the robust door opened with a dull sound.

Inside was considerably more spacious than what could be imagined from outside. It was twice as bigger than what she had observed from the cells of the other inmates when passing them by. With the room being so large, the scarce furniture stood out – a bed with only a mattress and leg blanks, a sink without a mirror, and though there was a toilet bowl and a bathtub, both were separated from the rest by thin, see-through curtains and nothing else. Other than that, numerous books lay scattered around the floor and a table with two chairs was placed in the center of the room. The furniture and wallpaper were completely white. It was almost like the interior of a dollhouse. Similar to a temple or shrine, it was empty and lonely.

“Hey, Violet Evergarden.”

A man sat on one of the chairs. Iron cuffs restrained his neck, wrists and ankles. His distinctive voice overflowed with the gallantry of a gentleman. Frosty-grey hair neatly combed, wax-like skin perhaps lacking contact with sunlight. His paleness was all the more outstanding given that he wore a white-and-black jumpsuit, and the mole under one of his foxy hazel eyes was his most remarkable trait. No hints of viciousness could be sensed in his kind smile, to the point one would not believe he was Altair’s most tightly secured prisoner.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I rush anywhere to provide any service a client might wish for. I am from the automated dolls service, Violet Evergarden.”

As Violet bowed elegantly, the man motioned towards the vacant chair. The cuffs made a disturbing sound as he gestured. “Well, sit down.”

Violet’s prosthetic shrieked as she put a hand on the chair. It seemed the object had been glued to the floor as to not be a potential weapon.

“Do you know about me?”

“I know what I read in the documents from the company that dispatched me.”

“Yeah? Then try reciting my criminal record.”

As though Violet had it flawlessly memorized, she immediately replied, “Firstly, you were wanted as a first-degree war criminal in the previous Great War. After your desertion, you repeatedly committed assault, rape and murder by arson, and after a while of being in the news, you established yourself as the leader of a religious cult. You are also at fault for the deaths of this cult’s devotees. Approximately four hundred believers poisoned themselves in a mass suicide on your command, Master. You also mangled these people’s bodies and made a tower with their parts. That amongst other things.”

The man gave Violet an ovation. “You’ve studied me well. I’m happy, Violet. You don’t have to refer to me as ‘Master’, just call me by my name.” he said, so lightheartedly that one could think the list of charges against him was not real. Yet bizarre hints of insanity constantly showed here and there as he did so. After all, he enjoyed listening to someone else talk about his countless sins.

Violet obeyed him without hesitation. “Sir Edward Jones.” The whispered name spilled icily from her lips. “Then, Sir Edward, this is a little rude of me since we have barely met, but I would like to start working as soon as possible.Who do you wish to write for?”

“Already? Let’s talk more.”

“The time I was given is limited.”

“I… do want you to write a letter, but it’s just one sentence, so it’ll be over soon. And then Violet will be gone, right? So let’s chat until the last

minute.”

“The time I was given by the higher-ups is thirteen minutes.”

“They were pretty stingy. It’s because you’re expensive. You’re like a high-class courtesan, right? You’ll do anything you’re told after the fee is paid.”

“I do not offer sexual services. I am an Auto-Memories Doll.”

“Haha, I was meant that you sell yourself. You… really… don’t change. In the past, when I saw you in the battlefield, you looked like a cold porcelain doll. That was my first impression of you.”

Violet’s eyebrows twitched at Edwards words. A small change happened in the face of the cold porcelain doll.

“Ah, this expression. You really don’t remember me. I’m also a former soldier. Even if we had never talked, we were part of the same strategy… see, back at the Gate Ghost battle when you had a temporary arrangement with this country. You were often selected to be in the special forces, right? You were always clinging to one of the superiors so it never felt like there was any opportunity to get ahold of you. That time, even the guys in my corps would comment non-stop on how cute you were. There was actually one that set off to make a move on you, but he didn’t come back before the strategy commenced… hey, did you do something to him?”

Violet did not answer Edward, who blathered on like cascading water. As though wanting to say something, she stood stiff with her mouth agape.

“Or maybe that superior officer took care of him? Does that mean you had hooked up with him? You two didn’t feel like that back then… either way, you were like a mad dog and her owner. Or could it be that you bred at night? I’m really curious about that… aah, don’t make that face, it’s scary. Women become stronger when they’re angry and it makes me nervous. But, Violet, I’m your Master right now so you can’t bite me.”

“You know… about my past.”

As he finally earned a reaction from Violet, Edward swung his head left and right, just like a child. “Yeah, I know… that you were a girl soldier who was recruited because of your strength. Also, that you threw your past away and now work as an amanuensis. I investigated a lot. That’s information I acquired before being brought here, though. Violet, have you ever been arrested? No? You’re treated as a hero after all… being an ex-soldier of a victorious country sure is nice… prisoners can only bathe once in every three days. Horrible, right? The food tastes bad too, it’s the worst. Because I am not given any forced labor, I have no choice but to indulge in daydream all day long. And I end up thinking about you a lot, so I wonder if this isn’t love.” Edward’s gaze drifted from Violet’s face to her chest. He observed the woman who was obligatorily in a submissive position as if wanting to lick her.

“Sir Edward, did you not hire me to write a letter?” Violet asked, not losing her voice at the intensely sexual stare.

At her attitude, which could be considered rebellious, Edward smiled while flailing his cuffed arms against the table. They clanked cripplingly. “I will have you write a letter. I told you so, right?” at that, he stopped smiling. As once did not seem to satisfy him, he continued to hit the table over and over, without caring if it hurt his hands.

“Sir Edward.”

Clatter, clatter, clatter. The unpleasant sound hurt in the ears.

“Sir Edward.”

Clatter, clatter, clatter. His skin peeled off, blood splattering from his wounds. It was a petrifying self-harming behavior.

“Edwar—”

“AAAA

Edward suddenly howled loudly like a wolf. The horrid sound reverberated through the whole room.

The door was soon banged from outside. As Violet turned backwards, she could see the guards peeking into the door's window to check on the situation with wary eyes. However, they refrained from going inside as Violet raised a hand with an "it is fine".

"I wonder… why no one properly listens to what I say." Edward moved his neck in circles. He then glared as though there were someone other than Violet near him. "It's so troublesome… Hey, Violet… you have it good, don't you? Even though we did the same things, you're treated with honor. People also listen more to what you say, right? Not my case. Once you're marked as inadequate, it's over." He trembled slightly as he firmly balled his fists. "Isn't that right? I mean, what's the difference between us? If it's the amount of people we killed, you're the one with a bigger number, right? I dunno why… but I'm a war criminal. War criminal. Do you know what that is? Someone who commits crimes during war. My country lost the last Great War, and the one that won – in other words, the allied nations led by your country – decreed that I am 'a mass murderer who killed too many people'. When the time to return to the majestic hands of my motherland that praised me for my strength came… our order was shelved and I became a live sacrifice. It's weird. It's really weird. It pisses me off. I killed a lot because my country told me to… so you think I could forgive them for suddenly being like, 'those actions were depraved'? I can't forgive… I merely ate the bait as I was told to. If what they gave me to eat was rotten, the one to blame shouldn't be me, but the higher-ups, right? Even so, those guys… tried to judge me before running away. I was just trying to make a place for myself in my country and lead a joyful life… but no matter where I went, I would be punished. I don't like punishment, it's scary… Hey, is there no country where you can do whatever you want without it being labeled as a crime?"

"I… have traveled to various places, but as of now, I don't think so." Violet's voice tone did not change.

Edward's smile grew as he kicked the underside of the table with his knees, as if to show her his indignation. The cuffs attached to his ankles

squeaked. “AAAAAAAAAH, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” again, he screamed exorbitantly,
“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

relationship with them was, the fact that dying was for them their utmost act of altruism, and the fact I was very happy about it… is our business. This form of love also exists. Even so, whenever I was in trial, I'd always be told that I was guilty… I wanted people to properly listen to me. Aah, I'm so envious of you, Violet. You're pretty regardless of the passage of time. Pretty, pretty… and not treated like filth or stigmatized as disgraceful like me, right? But it's exactly because… you're pretty that… Violet… I wanna mess you up. I wanna push you down, rip your clothes off, take your crying face into my hands, make holes in your body and fiddle with it. Hey, Violet Evergarden…"

After having spoken so much, Edward had recovered his cheerfulness, hazel eyes narrowing softly. It was a gentle look. Although his current state could make one forget about what had just happened, the blood remained splattered around the table before them as proof of his rampage.

"She and myself… what's the difference… between us?" he murmured a question, apparently to a third party, while turning to the opposite direction from Violet.

Edward had said that his feelings for Violet were hardly describable. To him, nothing could be defined right away. His curiosity, libido, murderous intent and anger blended, and so he could not choose one. Similarly, Edward himself could not be described with only one characteristic as a man.

Violet put a hand inside her jacket and slowly took out a handkerchief. She was the kind of woman to have something hidden within her person no matter what. Reaching out to Edward, she gave him the handkerchief.

"It doesn't hurt."

"But it's bleeding."

"I kinda… can't understand… you that well. Hey, you can tell just by looking at these cuffs, right? Instead of giving me a handkerchief when won't be able to wipe this blood properly, wipe it for me."

Upon being requested so, Violet put the kerchief over his arms. “Please unfold your hands. The blood can’t be wiped if your nails are covering it.”

Edward had been clutching his hands so strongly that his nails bit into his skin. Violet wrapped the kerchief around them as though to warm them up. Edward’s strength gradually dissipated at that.

“It’s been long since the last time a girl touched me.” Edward’s voice huskily spilled from his lips.

“I am not a girl.”

“What’s with that…? It’s not like you’re a man either, right?”

“Nevertheless, that is not it.”

“Then what are you?”

At Edward’s silent question, Violet closed her eyes, golden lashes shining. She was quiet for a moment, as if unable to organize her ideas. Even that action was beautiful. As Edward had commented, everything about her was attractive to others.

“As I thought, that is not it.”

On the surface, that was how things were.

“I am…”

An ex-militant and girl soldier.

“I am…”

A young lady with a beautiful body.

“I am…”

And said beauty, much like the snow, concealed something.

“…some sort of… remnant.” Violet defined herself as neither woman nor man, or even as a person.

“‘Remnant’…?”

“Yes. I am not what could be called… a ‘girl’. As Sir Edward said, I killed many as a soldier. I am an assassin. Except, the title bestowed upon me… was not this… that is all. In reality, I am one of the people that were supposed to be in here. The only difference… is what people… call us.”

Edward blinked a few times, as if astounded. “You admit you’re a murderer?”

“It is the truth. It is not as if… I had forgotten about this. And also not as if I had not acknowledged it. I still have weapons… inside my bag, despite the war being over.”

“That’s surprising… what, so this is how it is? I was completely under the impression… that you were living by re-creating yourself as something lovely and pretending your past had never happened. I mean, you…”

Edward’s hollow eyes seized Violet. The single figure reflected in those pupils – golden hair, irises of a blue even more crystalline than the sea’s, rose-colored lips. No matter from what perspective, she had been born loved by the Gods.

“You’re… beautiful.”

At that sentence, Violet thinly smiled at him for the first time. It was a taut smile that could almost make a sound as it spread. “People mostly see… what appears in front of their eyes. Even though it is not as if monsters are only those with horns.”

Violet’s hands were warm as they held onto Edward’s, but her words entered his ears coated in ice. A heavy silence fell between the two.

“It would be better if the sweet numbness I’m feeling now could be transmitted to you…”

More blood stained the handkerchief. It was due to Edward grasping her hands tightly.

“Hey,” the gaze he directed at Violet was alight with heat, “what do you think of killing?”

“I later learned that it is not something one should do.”

“What did you feel when killing?”

“The urge to… close my eyes.”

“Do you think of yourself… the same as other human beings?”

“No.”

“As in you consider yourself special?”

“No, I believe I am something dreadful.”

“Are you happy that the war ended?”

“There is a sense of accomplishment from completing my mission.”

“Were you happy when the war started?”

“No.”

“But the battlefield calls for you, right?”

“I will not return… to the army… ever again.”

“Why? Even if you don’t wish for that, your country does. Besides, the fact you haven’t yet re-enlisted is already weird. People of authority would be following behind your back, though. You can’t keep this ‘play’ on for long.”

“If he wanted so, I could return. I am in my current job because I was ordered to.”

“‘Ordered’?”

“Yes.”

“By that man… who was always by your side?”

“Yes.”

“Is that so? What a pity. Hey, what has been the most agonizing thing for you until now?”

“I do not understand agony very well.”

“Then, the saddest thing?”

“I do not understand this very well either.”

“Do you have someone you hate?”

“I do not… understand hatred very well.”

“Someone you love?”

“I do not… understand love very well.”

“Do you not have emotions?”

“I do not know.”

“What do you live for?”

“Since I was born, all that is left for me to do is live until I die.”

“Ever wanted to die?”

“No.”

“Hey, what would you do if I told you to never again wield a weapon in your life?”

“I would not accept it.”

“Do you like weapons?”

“Probably.”

“Do you like hurting people?”

“No… maybe… most likely.”

“You’re… wicked, huh?”

Only that question had to be answered after Violet chewed on her lip. “Probably.”

Edward could not suppress his grin. “What do I do?” he muttered curtly. “What do I do, Violet?”

“Is something the matter, Sir Edward?”

“I might really… end up falling madly in love with you.”

“Are you not just mistaken?”

“Mistaken about what?”

“Since I and Sir Edward… are alike, you are merely identifying with me and remembering the feeling of familiarity.”

“We’re not alike. I seek enjoyment in killing, but aren’t you different? Y’know, you’re… like a machine. Isn’t just the name of Auto-Memories Dolls perfect for you? The most beautifully corrupted doll in the world. But I… am a former murderer that killed people with a clear state of mind. Not someone magnificent like you.”

“But I…” She continued after sucking in a breath, “will not hesitate to kill if I am ordered.” Her words did not sound fake or made-up. “I will not hesitate if my ‘Master’ orders me. I believe we are as similar as can be. That is why… you… called me, is it not? I am similar to you, so you

wanted to see another version of yourself walk a different path from yours, is that not it? Sir Edward… I think that… you did something regrettable… by using me to fulfill your one wish."

Edward shook his head at Violet's words. His pale cheeks flushed and his previously narrowed eyes were wide open. "I have no regrets." His dark orbs twinkled. "I have… no regrets, Violet Evergarden!" he laughed shrilly, knocking his knees. "What, so this is it? This is how it was? You were always much closer to me than I thought, and you still are even now. I see, I see… aah, what is this? Sorry for getting irritated all on my own. My… you're wonderful. Wonderful, Violet. That has just been concretely proved. This time that I spent talking with you like this was splendid to me. Truly a great time. We should have seen each other sooner. And not… inside this hard rock fort, but in a place more appropriate for two people to meet."

"No, meeting in a place like this… suits us."

"Is that so?"

"Yes… it is. Now, Sir Edward, it seems time is almost up. Who will you write a letter for? Let us make use of any possible word. Allow me to fulfill my role. I am here… because you wished so."

That did not awaken Edward's enthusiasm. He merely watched Violet holding the pen and paper with a resentful look. "Hey, can I touch the shoulder of the arm you don't use to write?"

"I cannot satisfy that request."

"So stingy… isn't it okay to do me a small favor?"

"Has no one in this prison ever done it?"

At the question that seemed to attempt convincing him, Edward nodded with a child-like, innocent smile, "Yeah. Since, if it's within the possibilities… prisoners on death row will end up making one selfish wish before they have to die."

At that, Violet closed her eyes, and then averted her gaze to her own fingers grasping the pen. “Yes, that is right.” her words sounded the same as when she had answered Chaser. “Sir Edward, I ask you again.”

“Aah, sorry. I was ignoring your question, right?”

“Yes. Who is the letter’s addressee and what will its contents be?”

“I don’t want anyone else to hear who the addressee is so I will whisper it. I’m sending this to… only one person. Someone I seriously want to kill, but haven’t been able to.” Edward pointed to the ceiling. “To God.”

Upon hearing so, Violet did not say that letters could not be delivered to such place. She looked at the direction Edward pointed to and blinked as if it was too bright. As she did so, Edward brought himself near her, his face next to her ear.

“…write Him that.” Only Violet heard the words he breathed out. After having whispered to her, he placed a kiss on her temple. “Goodbye. See ya, Violet.”

As if the time was precisely measured, a buzzer that marked the end of visiting period rang. Violet exited the room with a sealed letter in hands. She bowed her head to the staff members that asked for safety as to whether everything was all right. Chaser thought that the lack of change in her expression ever since the moment she had gone inside was much too artificial and therefore alarming.

Same as before, the two of them walked together around the prison. They made their way up the stairs that almost seemed like a road to heaven, arriving outside. Violet did not hear Chaser say that, even if she rejected the offer, the latter would accompany her to the main gate, which was the only exit.

Perhaps because it was snowing, the footsteps Violet had left on the ground were no longer in sight, and a new pure white path lay in their stead. Snow really did hide everything. Smells, sounds, and everything in its way.

“Violet.”

About to enter the carriage prepared by the prison’s directorship, Violet turned on her heels upon being called by Chaser.

“Where… are you going now?”

“I will return to where my head office is located for a little while. It is… my current home.”

“Is that so…?” It was not what she had actually wanted to ask. “Hey, who will you deliver that psychopath’s letter to?”

The words Violet let out along with a white breath sounded bitter, “I cannot speak of my exchanges with clients.”

“I heard it. While you were in there, I was monitoring your conversation in a separate room. That was my other task for today. Hey, you can’t deliver things… to God. Just throw away… that rascal’s letter.”

“No.” Violet shook her head. “He is someone that I, too, will meet someday after all.”

The way Violet tightly gripped the handle of the bag where the letter had been put in somehow pierced Chaser’s chest.

——*For some reason… for some reason, I want to talk to this woman. She’s… different from me. She’s terribly beautiful and mysterious. Surely, she also has a very frightening side. Still…*

“The Gods that you and he will meet… are different.”

Looking closely, Violet was but a girl, with only the appearance of an adult. She was a mere girl, just a little older than Chaser’s children. Although she gave the impression of being a ‘woman’, her frame as she stood under the snow seeming cold was small.

“Is that so?”

“It is. That’s… what I think. I don’t know anything about you, but you… are the woman who watched over me to an annoying extent so that I wouldn’t slip on the stairs as you came down with me. Since I am… the kind of person that thinks everything is okay as long as the people I care about are fine… when… the time of meeting God comes… I will definitely meet him first. And if it’s all right for me to complain about a lot of things when that happens… I will properly tell him… that you cared for me. That you’re a good fellow, so He shouldn’t forget you. I’ll tell Him.” Chaser said cheekily, puffing out her ample bosom.

Would Violet smile or nod silently at that? As it turned out, her response was neither.

“Chaser…” was only for a matter of seconds, but she showed an expression similar to the cry-laughter of a child that had just found her mother. “Thank you.” Her voice sounded young.

“Violet…”

After lifting her skirt graciously and bowing while facing down, Violet turned back. She hopped onto the carriage and closed the door.

Chaser’s call, bordered on farewells, reverberated strongly amidst the world of snow, “Violet!”

The carriage’s figure grew tinier, unnoticeably merging with the falling snow.

“Violet! I’ll ask you to write a letter for me one day! Hey, you continue that job until then!”

Chaser did not leave the spot even after the carriage was gone from sight. Even a heart that did not know what to say would also be buried in white by the snow. The world which the carriage Chaser was watching disappeared into was simply beautiful.

Inside said carriage, Violet wiped off the little bit of snow that had fallen on top of her head. It melted at the touch of her hand. “Major…” she

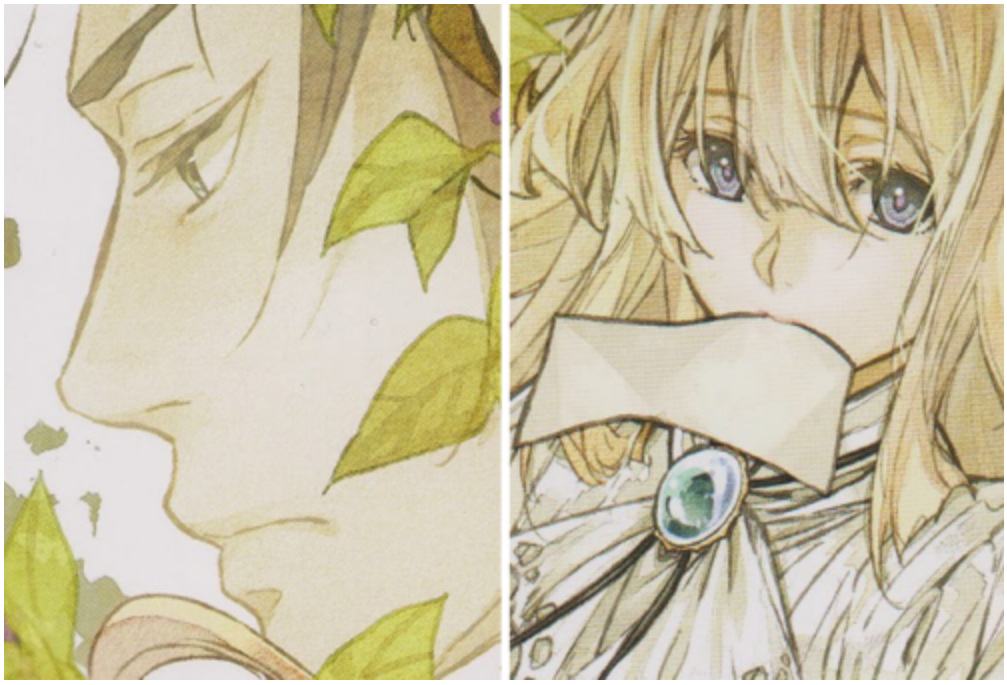
called for the honorific of her most irreplaceable person, “Major…”

“I want to see you. Where are you now?” she did not whisper such things.

“Please give me an order.” Such was what she yearned for more than anything else.

The doll ceased observing the landscape outside the window, deep in thought as she closed her eyes. She had the impression of hearing the far-off, nostalgic sounds of a battlefield.

Chapter 6: The Major and the Automated Assassin Doll



Leidenschaftlich – upon hearing the name, people would say it was a military nation. Such was the kind of impression that his country gave off.

Said country was located at south of the continent. It was a maritime nation with its major cities set along the seacoast. The temperatures were mostly warm yearlong and snowfall was not common in winter. The main national interest were marine products and the natural resources surrounding the ocean, as well as utilizing them in foreign trading. Leiden, the capitol serving as a gateway to land from other continents, was known as a trade port.

There also were many countries which economy would not survive if trading ever stopped in Leidenschaftlich. That was why there were just as

many threats from foreign enemies targeting his motherland. If one studied the country's history, they would find it to be mostly recordings of battles against invaders. Countless soldiers of enemy nations coming either from the sea or from borders between other continents had died in front of its forts. It had been under the control of other countries numerous times as well.

In such occasions, every citizen was roused into driving off intruders and regaining their country. That could be considered the main quality and spirit of the people living in the nation called Leidenschaftlich. Due to many continuous conflicts, sharpening their defenses became a necessity. They would flexibly incorporate the cultures and weapons of other countries earned through trading and make use of them while incessantly improving them. Those experiences turned Leidenschaftlich into a military nation renowned in the whole continent.

Within Leidenschaftlich was a household that had existed since its foundation – Bougainvillea. It was a family which ancestors were worshiped as national heroes. Its beginning was marked by when the family head of the first generation, Ratchet, became a patriot devoted to the salvation of his country through driving a myriad of raiders away with his sword skills and military strategies, consequently saving many people.

Following the grandeur of their predecessors, it was tradition in the Bougainvillea family to have its children join the army as a matter of course, which had not changed even in current times, when the 26th generation ruled over the household. This story begins with a turning point in the life of Gilbert Bougainvillea, the family head of the 26th generation.

Gilbert Bougainvillea saw 'it' for the first time during a chance meeting after several years with his older brother, Dietfriet, in the most prestigious inn of the capitol city, Leiden.

Those who had the blood of Bougainvillea would be born with jet-black hair, emerald eyes, long limbs, thin waist and broad shoulders. Dietfriet grew his hair long like a woman and tied it with a ribbon, inappropriately wearing the standup collar of his white naval uniform wide open, displaying the gold necklace around his neck.

“Hey, Gil. Have you been well? As always, you have a depressingly serious face on. It’s just like Dad’s.”

On the other hand, despite being of the same bloodline, Gilbert was the opposite of his elder brother, who had a flirtatious air about him, in looks. His inky hair was carefully combed from his forehead to the back of his head and his irises were of a softer shade than his brother’s deep green, orbs glowing like a true emerald gemstone. Unlike his brother’s impartial expression, his was virile. His features resembled a marble sculpture, eyelashes so long they cast a shadow in their tendency of being half-closed. Perhaps the evaluation of those who looked at him objectively was on-point when it came to him being a beautiful man with a melancholic face.

Disapproving of his brother’s figure, he wore the quilted collar of his own uniform – a purplish black outfit paired with burgundy linen shoulder pads and a decorative accordion-pleats cloth glistening at his waist – diligently buttoned up to his neck. The stoic colors matched Gilbert’s persona rather well.

On the top floor of a 12-story high-rise building, in a room where the accommodation for one night was worth a month of an ordinary person’s salary, the two brothers tightly hugged and sat on a nearby sofa. There were people present besides them. They were the comrades Dietfriet had brought along as he visited his younger brother when stopping by Leiden. All of them drank and smoked at the bar counter set up in the exterior of each apartment. White smoke swirled around the ceiling.

“Brother is… the same as ever.” Gilbert commented, eyeing his older brother’s un-soldier-like figure, as well as the companions he led, who wore similar get-ups. He was outstanding presence in such midst.

“It’s vacation, y’know? Unlike the army, the navy becomes very liberal every time we come back to land.”

“Brother… you dress like that no matter if you’re in the sea or on land, don’t you? That hair… if Father saw this, he would definitely not have allowed it. He’d probably cut it with his saber.”

“That would be a hassle. It’s good that he died.”

Dietfriet intended to be lighthearted, but his younger brother did not let it slide. He gave the other a stern glance.

Perhaps due to being weak to receiving such a look from him, Dietfriet sighed. “Aah… my bad. He might’ve been a nice old man for you, but to me, he was the worst. That’s all.”

“Is that the sole reason why you didn’t come to his funeral and left me to take over the inheritances on my own?”

“It fits you better, doesn’t it? That household was never adequate for me, and I’m not cut to be the family head. Rather than let our brilliant bloodline’s honor be tainted by my poor skills simply because I’m the eldest, it’s better to have a suitable and righteous guy doing the job. Even for the sake of future descendants. Hey, Gil. Hasn’t it already been a long time? Just forgive me already. I don’t wanna keep being guilt-tripped during our entire reunion. I might’ve parted ways from the Bougainvillea house, but I wanna remain your brother. Let’s talk about something fun.”

As he was told so in rebuttal, Gilbert fell silent.

It was a general custom in the Bougainvillea family to join the army. Although the army and navy were defense organizations that served the same country and part of the military, they were separate entities. Each was conscious of the other and both were often hostile towards one another. The motive was mostly that the two had to share Leidenschaftlich’s military budget. Money and interest are causes of conflict regardless of the location or era.

In the history of the Bougainvillea family, Dietfriet had been the first to choose the navy over the army. Not only had he joined it, but also steadily carved a career path for himself in it. It was all due to his confidence in scoring achievements with his own efforts and talents, even without making use of his parents’ glory. Gilbert acknowledged that, which was why he could not help thinking that his brother was the one that actually should have succeeded.

“Since you’ve finally stopped by… how about paying Mom a visit? Please be our mediator together with me.”

Were his brother not bad at accepting reality, things would not have become so complicated.

“Our family is big, so if I went to see Mom, I’d have to greet our sisters, Grandmother and all the older relatives too, right? It would be a bother. I can clearly see myself yelling at them and leaving after they start their faultfinding.”

As Dietfriet laid on his back, legs loosely crossed, Gilbert let his shock show at the abusive language. “Aren’t we family? Can’t you make an effort to get along with them at least a little?”

“It’s exactly ‘cause we’re family that I wanna keep a distance… But you… I can actually be around you. It’s difficult with the others. Gilbert, I’m grateful. Our parents’ expectations were canalized to you because I joined the navy, and you’ve been accurately responding to them. Even I… understand that I’m not being told so often to come back home because you’ve been a good replacement for me. That’s why… I came in a hurry to the celebration of your promotion… since we’re brothers.” Even from his younger brother’s perspective, Dietfriet was very charismatic as he playfully smiled with his eyes closed.

Although Dietfriet had a self-centered and bossy personality, he had some sort of quality that drew others to him. He was always surrounded and respected by many people, never bashful of it. Since Gilbert could not love anyone due to being too stern, his elder brother had everything he lacked, to the point of making him infinitely envious as a fellow human being.

“That’s right, I brought something great for the party.” Dietfriet casually signaled with his hand to one of his friends close by.

As he did so, the man brought in his arms a hemp sack taken from a different room.

“This is the weapon I’ve been using lately but I’ll give it to you. With this, there’s no mistake that you’ll keep getting even higher promotions.”

The sack was carelessly placed on the oval table between the two of them. Dietfriet smirked stiffly as Gilbert noticed something moving from within the sack and immediately got up from the couch, firmly gripping the sword plugged to his belt.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Gil. Calm down. It’s nothing strange. No, maybe it **is** crazy. Haha. It may be a bit difficult to handle and dangerous, but it’s well-behaved when you don’t give it orders. But don’t think of doing anything weird… since its looks aren’t bad. As far as I know, eight people tried to sneak into its bed and had their necks ripped. Its rough temper is troublesome. It doesn’t serve as a comforter.”

“What’s inside?”

“Only… use it as a weapon. Don’t think of it as anything else. Don’t get attached to it. It’s a ‘weapon’. All right?”

“I’m asking… what’s inside.”

“Try opening it.” Dietfriet’s words sounded like an invitation from a devil.

Gilbert and moved his hands to unravel the cord tightly tied around the hemp sack that had once twitched. The person inside looked like a mermaid princess for a moment as the hemp sack lay at her waistline.

“We haven’t named it. We just call it ‘you’.”

‘It’ was a girl. Her sooty-colored clothes were scraped rags made out of poor leather and fur. A choker that somewhat reeked of subordination was fastened around her neck. A smell that seemed like a mixture of rain, wild animals and blood wafted from her body. Everything that enveloped her was dirty. However, rather than it simply being a slightly muddy child that needed to be cleaned up…

——*It’s unthinkable… that she is from this world.*

…she was too beautiful. Gilbert's breathing halted at the girl's figure. Her waist-long ashen hair shone brighter than any gold jewelry. On her face were too many scratches and grazes. Her blue eyes could be seen beneath the slits of her disarrayed locks.

Orbs that were not exactly the color of the sky nor the sea looked straight at Gilbert. The two stared at each other for a moment. Neither moved, as though time had frozen.

"Hey, give your greetings." Dietfriet aggressively grabbed the girl's head and forced her to bow down.

Upon seeing that, Gilbert quickly pulled away his brother's hand and embraced the girl with his own two. She trembled in his arms.

"Don't be violent with a child! Have you been trafficking people!?" While hugging her as if to protect her, no matter how one looked at it, Gilbert was enraged. His face of pure anger with a vein protruding on his forehead silenced the blithe conversation of the other men in the room.

Amongst them, only Dietfriet remained collected and with a neutral expression. "Don't spout nonsense. I don't need slaves. I do want warriors, though."

"Then what is this girl?! What's so amusing about offering me such a small infant?"

"Like I said… this isn't a kid. It's a 'weapon'. I just told you that, didn't I? You're some pretty distrusting younger brother."

Gilbert observed the girl. Apparently, she was about ten years old. Her finely-adorned face gave off a slightly adult-like impression, but her youthfulness was delated by her petite shoulders and hands. Just what in her was a weapon? She was but a child that could easily fit within one's arms.

Gilbert's wrath subsided, gradually supplanted by sadness. Not letting go of the girl, he glared at his brother and got up from his seat. "I'm taking

her with me. Calling this… little one a weapon… I… don't want to see you ever again."

At those words, Dietfriet burst into laughter while holding his eyes. So did his comrades. Gilbert was shrouded in coarseness and disgust, as well as a bit of fear, while countless underlying laughs resonated in his ears. It was a bizarre atmosphere. He felt different from them in some way, though the feeling was not quite of alienation.

——*It's almost as if… I'm the one who is insane.*

From the beginning, only Gilbert was dissimilar amongst them. Perverse as something could be, the opposing minority would be considered the one in the wrong if it accounted for the majority. The vast majority's anomaly progressively encroached the minority's normalcy.

"What is… so funny?"

Dietfriet slowly stood up, walked towards Gilbert's side and tapped his shoulder. "Gil… I'm sorry for the bad explanation. Certainly, just by looking at it, anyone would have that kind of reaction. You're a serious and nice guy, too. You won't understand in one glimpse that this is a weapon. That's why… I'll show it to you in a practical way that will be easy to get. You come too." Dietfriet told the girl.

Without delay, she smoothly escaped from Gilbert's hands and followed after Dietfriet. However, she displayed a questioning attitude towards Gilbert for an instant. Whenever she moved, her blue eyes, which seemed to leave afterglows, invited people over with that single glance.

Gilbert hurried to get up again. What he was guided to was the next room, where the girl had come from in the hemp sack – a luxury bedroom.

It was only natural that there was more than one commodity; the problem was how the other was being used. The bed was pressed against the wall side, leaving a widely open space in the center. What lay in it were five more hemp sacks. Their size was big enough for adult males to fit into. Unlike the girl's, they moved constantly in rampage. Faint sounds akin to

cries of livestock, which merged with words that could not be discerned, leaked from them. Most likely, whoever was inside had been roped and gagged.

No matter the motive, treating humans in that manner was wrong. Those who could remain with composed expressions in such a situation were wicked, Gilbert thought. The contagious madness spread from the tips of his toes up to his throat, yet he somehow managed to muster out his voice, “Who… are they? Why are they tied up? Brother, explain what’s going on…” His heart buzzed sordidly, as if predicting the future.

“Ah, I gotta introduce these guys first, right? They’re filth that infiltrated our ship when we had stopped by a harbor.” Dietfriet gently kicked one of the sacks with polished leather shoes. “Guess they were looking for valuable stuff. They entered without examining the inner structure, ended up bumping into three cooks in the kitchen and killed them to keep their mouths shut. For us, who live in the sea, having satisfying meals is very important.” He raised his leg backwards and swung it low enough for the tip of his shoe to hit the sack.

Gilbert grimaced at the scream coming from inside.

“These guys… killed our best cooks, including the chef. How great do you think they had to be, given that they came abroad our ship to cook for us by our solicitation? You can’t pay them with the same amount that you’d buy a woman for one night. We, the navy, deal with the things that happen in each ship according to our own laws. Well, we’re on land right now, but… that happened in the ship, so this is valid. Now, I’ll show you something interesting… hey, get them out. Also, give them weapons.”

At Dietfriet’s command, the fellow men who had also come to the other room untied the hemp sacks one by one and let the thieves out. As the men released the ropes while pointing guns at the thieves, they handed knives over to each. The puzzled five had their lips curled down in fearsome expressions while asking, “What’s the meaning of this?”

Ignoring them, Dietfriet gestured exaggeratedly with his hand. “Now, this is the start of the world’s most mysterious and fascinating game.

Gentleman… well, there are none here. No ladies, either. Then, you bastards! What I'm about to show you is the wild brat I found in an Eastern continent."

Upon being pointed at, the girl stared at his fingertips with a face that seemed to not pose any emotions.

He continued, "I met this thing about a month ago when we completely butchered a shitty armed fleet that was plotting to destroy one of Leidenschaftlich's maritime trading ports. On a certain night, in the middle of the battle, we were hit by a huge storm. It was a grave catastrophe where both our allies and our enemies sank into the coastal seas. It seems this was in the news. I didn't know about it because I was drifting at the time."

Gilbert was skeptical at not ever having been informed that his brother had narrowly avoided death, but had no chance to discuss the topic in the flow of the story.

"The ship stranded, and I and some of my comrades arrived at a deserted island that wasn't marked in any map by using a small lifeboat. I found this on that very island. It was all alone, looking into the distance from the top of a big tree. Did its parents die? Did it suffer an accident in the sea like us? We still haven't found out its identity." Dietfriet confessed. "Its appearance isn't half bad, right? In ten or so years, it could probably twist an entire country, but it's still a brat. I have no interest in brats. I don't… but there are people in this world who do. Some of my former subordinates loved that kind of stuff. They gleefully approached it and attempted to molest it on the spot. We had just been drifting a while prior, yet they were so energetic. That was appalling. I was super annoyed, and was about to tell them to not irritate me any more than that as I went to try stopping those morons, but…" Dietfriet grabbed the girl's shoulders and brought her right in front of the thieves, her blue eyes seizing them. "… before I could do so, this thing killed my underlings." He grabbed her pale arms from behind and hurtled them around the air. The motion was of a wild beast about to attack a prey.

The thieves laughed dryly at the girl being treated as a puppet and at Dietfriet's short play. It was an expected reaction. Exactly what could that child do?

"With a stick that had been lying next to her feet, she stabbed one of them in the neck from the side, then stole a gun from his waist holster and shot him in the heart."

Gilbert could notice from his brother's expression that he was telling no joke.

"We all fled. There are numerous kinds of native peoples in this world. To think that we are the only strong ones is a mistake. If just one of their runts was that strong, how strong would an adult be? But no matter how much we ran, this thing hunted us down. It never got too close, but was also never far enough for us to lose it from sight. We went over the whole island. Our nerves were wrecked. I was exhausted and decided we had to do something, so I had my comrades ready their weapons and yelled, 'Everyone, kill!'. I had… meant that **we** were going to kill **it**. Still…" Dietfriet went on with an icy face, "…in the next moment, this thing slaughtered everyone in that place except for me." His way of speaking was of someone who obviously held a grudge. Dietfriet looked down at the girl with provoking eyes. "After that, I was pursued by this killer demon. It followed me around without leaving my side. It could have perfectly murdered me, but didn't. Words didn't work on it. While I couldn't figure out how to talk to it, I slowly realized that it was the only inhabitant of that island. Have you any idea how frightening it is to have a killer demon glued to you? When my sanity was finally gone, I said, 'just kill me', and then that thing slew an animal hidden in the grass. That's when I understood… that it had killed because I had ordered it to. Once I reckoned this, I did repeated experiments. For example, if I pointed to animals or insects and said 'kill', she would immediately do so like some sort of mechanical doll. Clearly, she would also exterminate people if told to. I don't know why it chose me. Maybe it was okay with receiving orders from anyone, or might have just submitted to whom it perceived as the most influential person of the group it had encountered. This has little intelligence. It doesn't speak any language, but can understand the order to

massacre. It’s as if it doesn’t need to know anything else. Despite my worries, I let this be beside me as I survived and waited for rescue. I brought it home with me.”

In the meantime, the people standing by the room’s exit and center had scattered. Dietfriet pushed the girl towards the thieves after giving her a knife. It was too big for her hands.

“Brother.” While thinking that could not be happening, Gilbert rebuked, “Brother, don’t do anything stupid.” Knowing it would not be enough, he stretched an arm towards the two from behind.

Dietfriet smiled only with his lips, and then pointed at the thieves while nodding at the girl. “Kill.”

Gilbert was about to grab the girl’s tiny fingers, but in a second, her hand was gone.

The command’s execution was instantaneous. The girl jumped like a cat onto the nearest man with the knife in position, slashing his throat as cleanly as though cutting a fruit from a tree. From his neck, the ‘branch’, a large amount of blood burst out, and his head, the ‘fruit’, shook relentlessly.

She posed no hesitation to assassinate, and was fast to move on to the next action. Using the man’s body as a stepping-stone, the girl leaped and wrapped her bare legs around the neck of another thief, thrusting the knife into the crown of his head. Cries of deathly agony echoed in the room.

The girl then took the unused weapon from the second corpse and turned to face the remaining three people. The thieves, who had finally realized the seriousness of their circumstances, screamed and launched themselves at the girl. But she was quicker. Using her small body, she slipped past their feet and stabbed one after another from behind.

She was so light, yet the way she swung her arms with was so heavy. Her body was even more impressive than Gilbert’s, who had been trained in battle and martial techniques as well as wielding weaponry in the military.

She looked as if she had no weight or center of gravity. Every time she flew around, fresh blood splashed along.

“Please stop… sto… stop…” the cornered last man implored for his life. He had completely lost the will to fight back, desperately pleading with trembling lips and a voice coated in fear, “I won’t ever do that again… I’ll compensate for my crimes… so please don’t kill me.”

Most likely, he was reminiscing to what the cooks had told him when finding themselves in the same situation, spitting out what he could remember. He then dropped his weapon to show no resistance.

The girl looked behind her shoulder while still clasping the bloody knife. She sought judgment.

Gilbert shouted, “Stop!”

“Do it.” at the same time, Dietfriet raised his thumb and motioned with it as if cutting his own neck.

The girl opened her mouth a little, showing reluctance. Her eyes darted between the two without settling on either. Seeing that, Dietfriet was perplexed for a moment, then started laughing. He seemed happy.

“Kill.” he ordered once again, still laughing.

The girl moved her arm while still gazing and Dietfriet, robbing the last man’s life. The series of murders took less than a minute altogether. Breathing heavily, she looked in their direction again. She did not speak, but her eyes inquired, “Is this enough?”

——*What is this?* Gilbert strongly asked himself. *What? What on Earth is going on?* He gulped lethargically. *Is this reality?*

“You got it, right? This, Gilbert… isn’t just a kid. Once you figure how to use it, it can become the best weapon in the world…”

He no longer doubted his brother’s words.

“But I’m scared of it.”

Even though she had just killed people, the girl simply stood there, apathetically awaiting further orders.

“It follows me all the time. It sticks with whoever gives it orders. It’s useful, but once I don’t need it anymore, I won’t be able to kill it. This is like an iron wall when it comes to its own protection. I want to use and discard it, but I can’t. This has a natural talent for carnage… no, for fighting. I’ll give it to you, Gilbert. Take it. Since it’s female, it might give some trouble during those days of the month, but if it’s you, you can pull it off, right?”

From his expression, Gilbert understood that Dietfriet was terrified of the girl from the bottom of his heart. Although he was smiling, it was strained.

“You’re definitely better fit for this too.”

The elder brother was pushing onto his younger one a living being that he could not handle by himself. It was for that reason he had called the latter over, with the excuse of celebrating his promotion.

“Hey… you’ll take her with you, right, Gilbert?”

Again, his heart made an unpleasant sound.

In the end, Gilbert took the girl with him. It was partly due to sympathy towards his confident brother, who had never claimed to be afraid of anything yet did have something he was fearful of. The rest was due to him deciding that nothing good would come out of leaving the girl with Dietfriet.

During the time of farewells, Dietfriet said to her, “Bye, monster. This is your new master.” Although he had never treated her like a human until the end, he gave her head a pat.

The girl remained silent, but turned to look back many times while being led by Gilbert, who held her hand. He put his military uniform’s jacket on

the barefoot girl, took her in his arms and stood still in the middle of the street.

Even in the aftermath of such a huge incident, the city of Leiden was the same as ever. The scenery was bright enough to make one want to cover their eyes and wonder if it was not actually daytime. The butcher that had just happened had not been leaked to the outside world. The corpses would also most likely either be found at a completely different place or never be discovered at all. Gilbert knew that his brother was not one to take a matter of that sort lightly.

"Hey, don't go thinking about leaving her in an orphanage or something like that. If it turns into a bloody murder site afterwards, it'll have nothing to do with me." The warning his brother had hammered into him like a nail replayed in his head.

After having witnessed the girl's fighting style, he did not even cogitate letting her go anywhere his eyes could not reach. The child looking at him as if he were something enigmatic was nothing but an unfortunate orphan.

——*In just one day, she killed five people.*

How should he handle the little 'killer demon'?

Gilbert seemed different from Dietfriet, but deep down, they were alike. Both viewed things objectively, determined exactly what was currently happening, and tried to deal with it in the best way. Even if they had a humane side to them of significant size, the equal amount of iciness was thanks to being part of the military.

He would not entrust her to anyone. What he should do with the girl he would never be able to neglect due to forgetfulness was obvious when he thought of her as a 'weapon' – he had to learn how to correctly 'use' her.

Leidenschaftlich was currently in conflict with many countries of the same continent and carried out war on expedition. Since the past, the reasons for clashes between fellow human beings varied from water and fuel to land and religion. All kinds of complex problems were included, but

Leidenschaftlich's main goal for participating the war was to prevent the monopoly plundering of maritime trade due to other countries' invasions.

Wars between great countries were simply referred to as continental wars. The origin of the current continental war was that the North of the continent had moved towards the South and invaded its territory. It trespassed the South's economic areas for poaching and illegal occupation. From the North's viewpoint, that had been necessary.

For some time, many of the countries of both North and South had traded supplies and services with one another. The North, which lacked natural resources, depended too much on trading with the South. As the South realized that, the prices steadily rose. Once the North requested more reasonable fees, the South threatened to cease their mutual trading. Taking control of the opponent by economic domination had been an initiative from the South. In an irrational response, the indignant northern countries decided to take over the South. In cooperation with one another, they repeatedly invaded and destroyed it.

It would have been fine if the conflict were only between North and South, but a different one occurred at the same time – a holy war between East and West. The western and eastern countries had been originally founded as a single nation with one main religion. While revering the same God, differences in the ways of worship and interpretation of doctrine spread out, and so they were divided into West and East.

Although it was originally an east-western country, the West and the South formed an alliance, and the East, which had a strong friendship with the North, displayed a supportive approach in regards of the South's invasion. The Northeast Alliance called for reconsideration of the South's trade treaty and the surrender of the pilgrimage areas owned by the West. The Southwest League demanded compensation for aggression by military forces, thoroughly expressing their intention to resist. And so, the continent became enveloped in wars.

Amidst it all, Leidenschaftlich was the keystone to the southern countries. It was the number one trading country of the continent, as well as a military nation. If Leidenschaftlich fell, the South would decidedly lose

and be ruled by the North. It just so happened that the South could be put to good use.

Neither could afford being defeated.

Leidenscahftlich counted with an interception unit for internal protection, a navy unit advancing overseas and the army (with the air forces being deployed in both army and navy), and ever since Gilbert had enlisted, he had been integrated in the army's attacking unit. The relationship with the northern countries was worsening from the time he had joined. He was sent to the battlefield at the age of seventeen and fought in it for around eight years, returning to his motherland a few times a year.

It was only recently that Gilbert had been promoted to major in light of his wartime achievements and expectations from his bloodline. He was currently on temporary leave from the battlefield in order to complete ceremonial procedures, such as receiving an award for his promotion. Meeting the girl at such opportune moment could be considered destiny. It was the most appropriate time for him to grasp the chance of filling a higher-ranking position.

Gilbert decided to enlist her on a militant unit that he had been appointed to take overall command of in his promotion to major. The objective behind the establishment of said unit was to polish talents that would act as secret maneuvers, separately from the main forces, in the decisive battle against the northern countries, which would come at them eventually. It was an ideal place to raise the assassin soldier-like girl while keeping her at arm distance. Still, even if she were to become a member of his own troops, designating a girl not old enough to serve would never be allowed. There were also people who deemed it wrong to have children so close. For the approval of her enlistment, it was necessary to introduce her to the higher military authorities in the way Dietfriet had done with Gilbert.

It had been few days since he had filed a direct appeal to the chief supervisor. A permission to conduct private experiments at the training grounds as to whether the girl could really be a 'weapon' was granted to him. Gilbert himself was surprised that the case had passed, but the reason

why the higher-ups had complied with the allegations of a young man who had just become major was courtesy of the appraisal he had accumulated. As he was the leader of an influential family, those who knew the man named Gilbert Bougainvillea were aware that he would not make such a proposal as a prank. The trust he had built had won in the end.

However, the brighter the light, the bigger the shadow.

On the day of the experiment, Gilbert and the girl found themselves in the training grounds of Leiden's army base. It was an institution mainly used for training hand-to-hand combat techniques. As a whole, it had the shape of a rectangular, spacious box.

Gilbert had planned to show off the girl's fighting abilities to a small number of people in private. Aside from killing, her physical abilities alone were astounding enough. However, when the time to put it to practice came, it was turned into a 'spectacle' rather than training.

"Those assassination hedonists…"

Dark curtains blocked the windows of the training room and a heavy, dirty large rug laid on the floor. Ten death row prisoners had been put in position. Amongst them were some who had committed post women violence and robbery murder. The one supposed to fight them was the girl alone. It was as though they meant to say that, if Gilbert's suggestions were true, defeating ten violent criminals would be easy. Gilbert himself, as well as the Bougainvillea house, were part of the faction that thought badly of such evil testing mechanisms.

——*Should I request a cancelation?* Gilbert contemplated in resentment. *No, but…*

There was no other way of raising her while keeping her near him. He was a soldier, she was a killer, and for the sake of being able to live together with him, she had to assert her own existence and earn a place to belong. What good would come of hesitating at that point, he asked himself. If he ever took her to the battlefield, she would not have to face only ten enemies. Thousands of soldiers were allowed to slaughter by using war as

excuse. The one who needed to reaffirm his resolution, Gilbert thought, was not the girl, but himself, in order to become her ‘user’.

While reflecting on that, Gilbert realized that the cufflink of his sleeve was being pulled. “What’s the matter?”

The girl was looking at him. As she was expressionless, he could not tell what she was thinking. She appeared to be simply observing the attitude of her new master with her huge blue eyes. It could be that she was concerned about him.

“Aah, I… am fine.” Although she supposedly did not understand words, Gilbert spoke to her gently.

Hearing the answer, she stopped moving for a moment, then pulled the cufflink again.

He felt she meant to say, “If you have any orders to give, please do”, and smiled bitterly at it. “It’s all right. More importantly…”

“Gilbert!”

As he was called from behind, he turned around midsentence. “Hodgins.”

A man of the same age as Gilbert approached him with a carefree smile. Just by looking, he seemed like a good man who got along with women. He had a handsome face and droopy eyes, his chiseled features exceptionally masculine. His characteristic red hair had smooth waves. His military uniform was worn-out, an ornamental plaid cloth hanging from his belt. He gave off a completely different impression from Gilbert, who was clad in the same outfit but without any accessories.

“Dammit… I’m so happy! You were alive! It’s been a while. And on top of it, you’re being promoted to major!” The man named Hodgins continuously slapped Gilbert in the shoulder without ceremony.

Perhaps because his body weight was unbalanced, Gilbert plunged forward as if about to leap. “That hurts… don’t hit me.” was what he opened his

mouth many times to say. Such was the relationship between the two old friends.

The girl watched Hodgins with a cautious stare, but as though concluding he had no ill intent towards her lord, she let go of the latter's cufflink.

"My bad, my bad. I just returned from receiving a medal. While greeting everyone, I heard you were in an extreme situation, so I asked my superior, who I get along with, to let me come here. Have you been well? Are you eating properly? You don't have a fiancée or anything of the sort yet, huh?"

"You can tell by looking, right?"

"That chilly attitude of yours… it's been so long that I'm kind of finding it endearing, how weird… Then, in place of a bride, you ended up getting yourself only a daughter?" Hodgins averted his gaze from Gilbert to the girl. He then naturally crouched down to meet her eye level. "What would your name be?"

Silence.

"This kid is quite the taciturn."

"She… still doesn't have a name. She's an orphan with no education and doesn't understand words." Gilbert explained while unwittingly turning to the opposite direction. For some reason, he was hurt by his own words.

"You… that's terrible. She's so pretty. Just pick a name worthy of her. Right?" Hodgins asked, but as expected, the girl did not react.

He could almost hear ticking of a calculator coming from her blue eyes. It was as if she had isolated a target but was doing some sort of analysis as to what kind of existence she would deem him to be.

"I'll get embarrassed if you keep staring at me like that… hey, Gilbert, I heard about your circumstances, but are you okay?"

"With what?"

Hodgins stood up after wiping dust off his knee. As he was taller than Gilbert, the latter had to look upward. “I think there’s still time to take it back. Are you really gonna let this child into a killing spree? It seems the higher-ups are looking forward to it, but I wouldn’t stand for a future beauty to be massacred so cruelly.”

“I’m not worried about that. Hodgins, it’s about time for us to go to the bleachers.”

“Hey, Gilbert.”

Facing the girl who only observed without taking part in the conversation, Gilbert opened his mouth, “You can… do it, right?”

It was a pointless question. She could not answer. However, Gilbert could not remain without a confirmation.

“You… are going to overcome it. This situation.” As he regarded the girl, his resolve was shaken. His friend’s words also increased his sense of guilt. Yet he would swallow all of it down and grab onto a future where he could live with her.

——*From the moment I embraced you, our destinies intertwined.*

Gilbert believed she had to assert her own near-impossible existence.

“I’ll be watching upstairs.”

Leaving the girl with the training referee, Gilbert sat on one of the bleachers closest to the ceiling. Hodgins sat next to him as if it were the obvious thing to do. As he pulled out a cigarette and asked “want one?”, Gilbert took it mutely. With the cigarette between his lips, he used the tip of Hodgins’s own to light it.

“It’s been a while since I smoked.”

“You were with a kid, after all! It’s hard to smoke around them.”

“She seems used to it, but coughs occasionally. Seeing her like that, I couldn’t smoke anymore.”

Hodgins’s eyes narrowed kindly at Gilbert’s profile. “Gilbert, were you always this type of guy? You’ve gone really soft. How about buying a house? It might be unexpectedly fitting for you.”

“Are you recommending that even though you have no intention to get married?”

“I’m a philanthropic, so I can’t get caught onto one person! Ah, I’ll ask again… does that child really have as much potential for battle as you alleged to the higher-ups?”

“Of course.” Gilbert had no concerns in that regard.

“Hey, don’t reply so quickly.”

“Even I surely can’t win against that girl. Same for you. Though it would be a different story if both of you were unarmed.”

“That’s a lie, right? There’s no way I could lose. Just saying it, but although I may be nice with women, I don’t hold back if they’re enemies.”

“Your resolution isn’t the problem. She is a genius…”

Hodgins leaned forward on the bleacher and observed the girl below. The man serving as supervisor was handing weapons over to her. Guns, swords, bows – they were apparently of free choice depending on preference. After a moment of indecision, she picked a small axe. Next was a knife and a one-handed mechanical bow.

Laughter spread in the place at her figure as she selected more than two weapons of different handling. However, as she equipped the mechanical bow onto one arm without reluctance and fired a trial shot, the room fell dead quiet. Subsequently, a noisy wave of whispers ensued.

“The stronger the weapon, the better.”

Everyone was starting to realize the whimsicalness of that beautiful creature little by little.

Gilbert had explained to the supervising officer that she would only move if ordered to ‘kill’. He had also received orders from his superiors stating that the one to play such role would be the referee, claiming that was for the sake of checking if it was not actually just a trick.

——*There are no tricks or anything, but if that will make her strength acknowledged, we’ll have to comply.*

The shackles on the prisoners’ feet were cut off with sabers. They were given batons. Their precision rate and power was unlike that of the axe, but those were not people who would falter before a child for wielding it. On top of that, it was an all-against-one match. Even if she had chosen a gun, she would be killed if she ran out of bullets, so in the end, it would be the same as if she let the axe slip from her hands.

“Huuh, then… who are you betting on?”

“Hah?”

“I mean in the wager. About who will win. After hearing what you said, I bet on that Little Lady. By the way, we’re wagering with cigs. Goods are more valuable than money right now.”

“Do as you want. And I don’t have any.”

“Aight, then I’ll lend it to you. You, too, should bet five on that girl. If we win, we get the triple of that. If we lose, treat me to a meal. With drinks.”

“I don’t need cigarettes.”

“Gilbert-boy, we’re using cigs to get our hands on other stuff. Like information or goods more expensive. If things go well, buy that girl actual clothes. Those primitive garments might be easy to move around with, but they’re not cute in the slightest.” Hodgins argued at his own convenience and left his seat.

Gilbert could not even call it surprising. Hodgins was the exact kind of man to bet on a child right after having said he would not stand to see her die.

By the time he returned, the bleachers were almost fully occupied. As the soldiers watched, the referee made his move. There was no one to clarify the meaning or origin of the occurring experiment; he merely required Gilbert for consent, to which the latter nodded.

After directing the girl and prisoners to opposing ends of the training ground, the referee said in a loud tone, “Now, commence.”

Wrapped in a hushed heat, the killing spree began. The prisoners grinned while staring at the girl. None moved immediately in attempt to kill her. Their bodies had been freed after a long time. They probably thought it would be boring to end things so easily. Meanwhile, the girl was completely immobile, even as she was commanded to ‘kill’ by the supervisor. Like a figurine, she stood still while holding the axe.

“So it really was a lie? We’ve been made to attend to something so pathetic…” Some bantered without caring about Gilbert hearing it.

“There’s no way that child can win against adults. Just take it back already. Poor thing.” Some murmured on behalf of the girl.

“The Bougainvilleas sure have fallen. To think he’d try to attract attention with a farce…” At such critical moment, some even spoke ill of the power retained by Gilbert’s family.

“What a waste of our time.” The surrounding soldiers talked raucously amongst each other.

“Hey, Gilbert.” Hodgins called out to him in apprehension, yet Gilbert remained quiet without outwardly displaying nervousness.

——*Why won’t she move?*

Gilbert observed the girl. She gripped the axe tightly. There was no way she had no will to attack.

——*Back then, too, she was holding onto those weapons without hesitation. She also has no signs of being afraid. Some sort of cue is missing. But if that's not the order, then, what is it?*

While he reasoned, the biggest man of the group stepped out of line to charge at the girl, extensively swinging the baton and laughing. Although he was at a certain distance, the girl did not budge.

"Hey, Gilbert! She'll be killed like that!"

With a twitch, the girl reacted to Hodgins's scream-like voice, looking up at the bleachers. Her blue orbs found Gilbert's green ones amidst the many other soldiers.

"Gilbert, go stop them! Hey!"

Their gazes merged and, for a second, Gilbert had the feeling their heartbeats were also in sync. Thump, thump, thump. He could feel the disturbing sound of his own heart resonate in his ears.

For some reason, time was running sluggishly. Hodgins was too noisy on his side. The higher-ups cursed the girl with inappropriate words. He could hear them, yet it was as if they were in a slow-motion video.

In his eyes, the prisoner approached the girl in a languid pace. The space between them was closing. In that immediate mortal peril, she looked only at Gilbert. No matter how many times the referee gave the order, her eyes reflected no one but him.

——*She staring at… her chosen one.*

In response to that, Gilbert recited the magic word, "Kill."

He spoke in a volume that only the few people around him would have been able to hear, yet it had definitely reached the girl. The sound of the axe cutting the wind as it twirled soon followed.

The wooden axe's blade was of about fifteen centimeters in length. The lethal weapon was released from the girl's hand, flying into the air. It was flung after being held aloft from behind, continuously rotating in beautiful arcs.

The girl's throw had been much too casual. She went for the kill without wavering, moving extremely smoothly and having no doubts as of what to do to defend herself from the looming adversary.

"Ah…" a moronic yet pitiful yelp escaped the prisoner's lips.

At the same time, the people in the audience gasped with jaws dropped.

"AAA-AH… AAAA-AAAH… AAAAAA-AH, AAH, AAAAAAH!"

The axe had landed into his forehead. Glittering blood ran down from the injury.

"AAAAAAAAAAAHH! UH… AH… AUUAAAAAAAAH, AAAAH, AAAAAAAAAAAAH—AAH… AH, AAAH… AH, AH, AH!"

Immediately, the girl aimed the mechanical bow and shot an iron arrow. It perfectly hit the handle of the axe stuck in the prisoner's head. With the impact of the arrow, the blade was buried further into his cranium. The prisoner continued screaming until he collapsed backwards with an agonized, painful expression.

All chatter ceased.

Without paying the crowd any mind, the girl moved her petite feet in the direction of the convulsing prisoner, aiming the bow towards his torso and firing another arrow as she drew closer. It was a ruthless, precise, mechanical murder. The iron arrow pierced his chest and took his life away for good.

The girl retrieved the axe from the corpse and swung it lightly downwards, the blood and fat on the blade splashed onto the floor. She also seemed familiar with the successive pattern of collecting the iron arrows and

repositioning them. Although her frame was of a young child when she stood still, her image was that of a skilled hunter when she moved.

No one had foreseen that the rug laid on the training ground would be stained with the prisoners' blood. But from then on, that place would be covered in it. A girl soldier who would engrave her name in the history of Leidenschaftlich's army was about to be born. As the spectators fearfully embraced that premonition, their stares focused on Gilbert.

He stood up, leaning his body against the security rail. Once more, he gave the order, yelling on top of his lungs, "Kill!!"

The girl moved like an automated doll. She sped up, her small body progressively lowering. Again, she threw the axe, still glistening with blood, into the vital point of one of them.

The prisoners then separated into those who scattered off and those who charged at her wielding their batons in spite of being overwhelmed. The ones that ran away were shot merciless and repeatedly in the head by the arrows. The brave ones cooperated with one another and surrounded the girl. It seemed they planned to corner her and beat her to death. They attacked in unison, trying to steal her weapons.

But that scheme was a mistake.

In the meantime that the girl could not be seen through the gaps between their bodies, the prisoners screamed and rolled onto the floor. Their ankles had been hit, and it was not a random attack – she stabbed and slashed them over and over. Such tactic could be executed due to the girl's effective flexibility. Her figure as she stood with the knife in hand in the middle of the fallen ones was horrifyingly extraordinary, like a fairy conceived from petals of blood.

As a prisoner attempted to escape while dragging his feet, she rushed to grab his head from behind and tear his throat with the knife, silently ending his life. Her hand movements were similar to that of a chef decapitating fish and chickens. She then turned to the prisoners waiting to be dismantled, murdering them one by one. In the process, the knife

eventually became unusable and she could not kill with anything except the batons.

“No! No! No!”

“She’s a monster! Help us! Hey, please help us!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”

One baton was used and discarded per person. The faces of the prisoners were seamlessly turned into caved-in depressions. Gradually, even some of the soldiers on the bleachers, accustomed as they were to seeing dead bodies in the battlefield, started vomiting and turning their eyes away from the atrocity. However, Gilbert watched it all. Firmly gripping his sword and suppressing his emotions, he kept his eyes wide open until the end.

The one originally meant to serve as bait for such a homicidal game had been the girl. However, he had also not wished for her to be the only one breathing in the end. After all the prisoners had been killed, had they been insufficient as the girl stared straight at referee who watched everything while holding a gun?

The frightened referee pointed the gun at her, but whether he could kill her or not was debatable. Whatever weapon was used to confront her, the chances of winning were slim. She was absolute. Her fighting techniques using multiple weapons compensated for her lesser physical power. Her outstanding skills were superior to brute strength.

Where had she learned all of that and what did she use to do? Even if she could talk, one could not hope for a decent answer.

Her assassination techniques made clear that she had a gift for conquering things through butcher. Not even being outnumbered was an issue. The audience of that ‘show’ was enraptured by her and could not help but applaud her wonderful talent. She was a prodigy. If any gods that controlled death existed, surely she was dearly loved by them.

The little killer who had obeyed the commands of her lord directed her gaze at Gilbert. Blue and green eyes met.

“Stop.” He shook his head at the girl. As he did so, she dropped the baton she had been holding and knelt down on the spot.

Seated on the pool of blood, the girl breathed profoundly. Even as she was sultry with blood and fat, her figure as she inhaled and exhaled with such small lips was but that of a child. It only added up to her fearsomeness.

Hodgins had previously felt dreadful towards Gilbert, as the latter had been too nonchalant, but was a little relieved to see that his profile was pale, fist trembling from his own grip. Hodgins was the kind of simpleton who would try to act as a tease in such a situation, but since his own hands were trembling as well, he settled for slapping Gilbert’s back. “This is quite a discovery, Major Gilbert.”

Gilbert did not reply to the light-hearted compliment.

He had come to realize two things with the ‘experiment’. One was that the girl had an unparalleled strength and was truly a monster. The other was that she would most likely only listen to his orders.

The girl’s deed had stirred Leidenschaftlich’s army.

Later on, Gilbert received an internal command. The direct superior informed him that a new troop had been established for him to lead as captain-major. As originally arranged, the attacking unit was named the Leidenschaftlich Army’s Special Offense Force. Gilbert was required to guide said unit towards the upcoming final battle. Additionally, there was one more thing he was expected to do – to improve a secret weapon not included in the documents that listed the troop’s constituting soldiers.

Leidenschaftlich certified her existence as armament, not a person. Her user was Gilbert Bougainvillea. There was no registered name. In actuality, the attacking unit had been created for her sake.

The day was over in a flash as the various preparations and correspondences for the launching of the team were dealt with. Gilbert formally greeted her as a subordinate, and though she had been forbidden to go close to the front gates, she was allowed to walk around the headquarters. Despite not being registered as a human, she was the one who would always be by his side from then on.

In accordance to Hodgins's words, he somehow managed to persuade a frightened female officer into taking care of the girl's daily necessities. She who had her hair cut and was dressed in a brand-new military uniform became famous within the head offices, and there were those who went as far as going to Gilbert's dorm room to see her. If they were in lower positions than himself, they would leave with a single shout, but he could not do anything reckless when it came to superior officers. There were many who would stare at the girl with perverted eyes as well, which would cause him to sigh multiple times a day.

——*I'm doing something terrible.*

It was certain that the girl was different from normal human beings, as well as that she was alarmingly strong and could slaughter several people in a row. However, it was also certain that she was a 'young girl'. No matter how many had perished by her hands, she was only a small child, and the reason why she did not speak was that no one had taught her how to.

——*If she's a monster, is it really all right to use her like this? Is it all right to utilize her as a weapon?* Although it was something Gilbert himself had started, he inwardly wavered. *Still, in what kind of other place could I leave this child?*

It was a realistic problem, but he ignored the pain of his conscience and pushed it to the back of his mind. If there was anything he could do, he believed it was to turn her into a great soldier. After all, she was a heaven-sent warrior child who sought his orders.

The departure ceremony was completed. On the night before the dispatch day, Gilbert decided to talk to the girl about his feelings at the dormitory.

Her figure just before going to sleep, wearing a negligee, was unbearably adorable. Her loose golden hair was as soft as a touch of silk. From the next day on, it would be stained in the color of blood again.

He had her sit on the bed, kneeling down on the floor to meet her eye level. “Listen. Starting tomorrow, you’re going to the battlefield with me. I’ll be borrowing your strength. Surely, you don’t yet understand why you have to be doing this, or why… you’re with me after parting ways with my brother.”

The girl merely listened to Gilbert’s words.

“You don’t know anything. You know nothing except how to fight. I am making use of this. That’s why you, too, should make an effort to use me. Anything is fine. Gold, positions of power… steal from me anything you might want. Become able to think of all sorts of things. You see, I… can’t protect you in any other way. I actually want to bestow you with parents to raise you appropriately. But I can’t.” Gilbert admitted painfully. “I am… scared… of you killing someone without my knowledge. I want you… to understand why that terrifies me so. It’s fine if it takes time. Even if just a little, please embrace my values. If you do that, you should be able to become something more than a ‘tool’, which is what you’re being treated as right now. Please find a place to belong by my side and live on.” He spoke desperately with his hands rested on her thin shoulders. She did not understand what he was saying anyways, but even while being aware of that, having no other method to earnestly transmit his feelings, Gilbert went on, smiling in slight distress at the girl who continued to not say anything, “I’ve decided… to call you Violet. Refer to yourself as that. It’s the name of a mythological flower goddess. Surely, when you grow up… you’ll become a woman worthy of it. Understand, Violet? Do not be a ‘tool’; be ‘Violet’. Become a girl fitting of that name.”

The girl – Violet – stared dazedly at the man calling her name, blinking several times. While doing so, although she was supposed to not know how to speak, for some reason, she nodded slowly and opened her mouth, “Major.”

Gilbert’s eyes widened in astonishment at the whisper that leaked from her lips. “You can use words?” His heart raced to the point of aching. The words he spoke in the countless days he spent conversing with her flashed through his mind instantly.

“Major.”

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Violet?” he asked, somewhat happy despite being anxious.

“Major.” No matter how much he inquired, she would not say anything else. Then, pointing at herself, she repeated, “Major.”

“Wrong, you are Violet.” Taking her tiny index finger, he alternately pointed at her and himself a number of times. “The major is… me. You are Violet. Get it? I am Major. You are Violet.”

“Major. Violet.”

“That’s right. You’re Violet.”

“Major.”

“Y-Yes. I am… I am… the major.”

Why had she suddenly started talking? Why was his honorific the first word she uttered? Had she learned that he was called ‘Major’ from hearing someone refer to him as such? Had she felt that he was trying to give her a name and decided to confirm his? Only she knew the answers to such questions. In the end, she still could not say anything besides ‘major’ and ‘Violet’.

Excessively saddened, Gilbert lay his head on her shoulder and sighed. She simply let him do so. Ignoring him as his head hung sloppily, she continued to whisper, “Major.” It was an attempt at memorizing it, as to never forget the word.

“Major.”

In-between her golden bangs, her blue eyes slowly opened.

Sounds of subsequent explosions echoed in the surroundings. The sky was a sunny azure, but from the eyes of the birds above, only a vehement firefight could be seen. In an inhabited plain that was almost a desert, the unit was divided into two factions, working on their offense and defense.

The owner of the blue eyes was a woman terribly mismatched for a land of war. With a beauty akin to that of a doll, her all-too-refined complexion was not seen as anything but unattainable for ordinary people. Her whole body was covered in dirt as she lay flat on her back over the soil, staring at the man agitatedly watching her and muttering, “Major… for how long… have I been unconscious?” The voice mustered from her red lips had a sweet ring to it.

“Not even a full minute. You just had a minor brain concussion because of an explosion’s impact. Are you all right? Don’t force yourself to stand up.” The one who replied was a man of huge emerald orbs. His battle uniform was made of grass-green fabric and white fur. He had handsome facial traits that harmonized with his gloomy expression.

The young woman immediately sat up, regardless of being told otherwise, and confirmed the situation. In the frontlines were soldiers who wore the same military uniforms, forming a protective barrier in the camp to block gunshots. Behind them was a gigantic hole with numerous corpses distributed around it. Combat medics were everywhere, but not many survivors were expected. On the other side of the allies’ barrier, beyond the blowing dust of the enemy grounds, a large-caliber gun, which had created the mountain of dead bodies ahead, was positioned out of sight. It had probably recoiled backwards due to the bombardment and did not show signs of moving anytime soon.

“Major, I will cross to the other camp, cause a disturbance and break their balance first-thing. Then I will bring down their cannon. Since it’s so huge, it should take time to reload. Please give me aid.” As soon as a she said so, the young woman lifted the battle-axe that she had been holding even as she had lost consciousness.

While sabers, guns and cannons were mainstream, the battle-axe was a classic weapon. It was menacing at close-range fights, but would be nothing but a disadvantage against a distant opponent. To compensate for that, the long-handle axe wielded by the young woman was enormous. The total length was probably more than her height.

The so-called ‘Major’ had an agonized expression for a moment, but immediately raised his voice and gave orders, “Violet will stop the cannonballs! Front vanguard, protect her from where you are! Rear vanguard, back Violet up and get rid of whoever interferes!”

The soldiers behind the major’s back quickly took formation as she readied herself, positioning her big-scale weapon’s handle, which had almost the same diameter as the body of a human child, over her shoulder. The reason for doing so could only be comprehended as she took off.

“Fire!!”

A cannonball shot after the signal flew far past Violet as she broke into a run, landing on the ground and creating white smoke as it burst. It was a smoke bomb; a way of hiding her figure from the enemy line. The other side could only see a rising fog. The troops with stars in their army flags – a proof of alliance with the North – stopped moving at the unexpected smoke curtain.

“Do they intend to flee?” one of the North’s soldiers asked in surprise while accidentally loosening the hand he had on the trigger of his gun and being scolded by the commander. The latter then yelled instructions to shoot at the smokescreen, but as the bullets were fired into the invisible target, they disappeared. It only gave way to anxiety, as it was an inevitable waste of ammo.

The white smoke spread like a thundercloud. Said sight was the sole nuance of the warriors whose mission was to take their enemies’ lives. It was not something to feel at ease for by any means; rather, it only caused disturbance. An indescribable ‘tremor’ surged within their bodies at the abrupt silence brought upon by Leidenschaftlich after such an overheated firefight.

The space in-between the two camps started to clear up. Whatever Leidenschaftlich army's next move would be, there was no way it would suddenly charge at them. Once the smoke settled, would there be nothing left? Or rather, would there not be a terrifying 'beast' advancing towards them from within the forest of smoke ahead?

"So… So… Something is coming!" a shout ensued once the premonition became a reality.

Something that resembled a snake surfaced out of the smoke curtain and wrapped itself around the ankle of one of the soldiers. He was immediately pulled into the whiteness, and from it could be heard his screams of fatal anguish.

Before long, the unidentified object returned. Looking closely, it was a long counterweight chain. Its tip had an ornament in the shape of a physalis fruit. As its user seemed to attempt the same move twice, it was aimed at someone else's foot and repelled by a saber.

The chain quickly withdrew, coming back after a few seconds. As if the previous speed had been merely a tryout, it came hitting all of the front guard shooters in the face with a remarkably differing swiftness. The move was done with the ornament of the chain's tip, which was actually a cluster of sharp sickles. It painfully shed off the soldiers' eyes and noses, promptly rendering tens of people unable to fight.

"AAH—AAAAAAH—AAH… AH, AH!"

"IT HURTS! IT HURTS, IT HURTS, IT HURTS! AH, AH, AH… NO… NOOOOO!"

"KILL IIIIIT! DON'T LET THAT THING GET UUUUUS!"

Multiple commands and screams intermixed.

The commander, whom the soldiers had been protecting, wound up uncovered. As if targeting a defenseless prey, the chain stretched out. The tip's sickles caught his head. Following a blast sound similar to a gunshot,

the decoration that ended up becoming a part of the armament crushed the commander's face on the spot. Blood gushed out, flesh splattered. The commander fell to his knees and collapsed lifelessly.

The North allies became totally still for a moment at the unanticipated brutality, before the storm of shouting filled the space again.

"Attack! Whatever the opponent is, just kill them!" someone said amidst the unrest. It seemed the cannon being prepared from far behind the front guard was finally ready to shoot again. Their intention was probably to blow up the undisclosed enemy.

The blood-soaked chain mercilessly hurled off its victim and reverted into the smoke, aiming for the cannon once it returned. The artilleryman put himself in position once the preparations for discharge were done. However, he was not attacked in the same way as the commander – instead, the weapon bound him by hands and feet, as if to attach him onto the gun barrel.

Just as it had done up until now, the chain retreated to the same direction it had come from. It likely had an extension-and-contraction function, and could not pull anything too heavy. Given that, what happened next was the chain being pulled by the opposing side. Sounds of machinery could be heard from beyond the smoke.

The chain's wielder at last revealed themselves. They could have been awaiting for the extreme chaos to reach its peak. A single soldier stood amidst the smokescreen, retracting the chain that firmly tied the barrel and the artilleryman together. They carried a battle-axe of the size of a person.

"What… is that…!?"

The unnerving intruder's weapon was odd – the counterweight chain stretched from within the end of the axe's handle. They advanced towards the enemy camp at high speed while propelling onto the chain's automatic retrenchment. On top of that, they had a gun in one hand, shooting the people they passed by in the head, going as far as artistically jumping onto

the gun barrel and exposing themselves to the soldiers of the northern alliance's army.

The warrior with the peculiar battle-axe who had penetrated into the enemy defense was a blue-eyed, golden-haired girl. She wore Leidenschaftlich's military uniform as proof that she was part of it. The soldiers were taken aback not only by the fact she was a female or that she looked too young, but also by her striking beauty.

"Warning. If you do not wish to die, surrender." The stunning girl soldier kicked the chain with her military boots, causing it to shake violently onto the barrel, demanding submission. "Those who do not leave their weapons on the ground…" one of her hands held onto the battle-axe, the other onto the gun. "…will be seen as planning to fight back, and shall be annihilated in the name of Leidenschaftlich's army." Before finishing the last sentence, Violet raised the axe over her head.

Even without an outbreak signal, the battle restarted. Violet jumped into the horde of soldiers that came for her with bloodshot eyes. Multiple blades were pointed up simultaneously, as though to skewer her.

"I did warn you."

No matter how incredible of a weapon she wielded, it was still extremely inconsequent to throw herself into enemy camp all alone. But even so, a shower of dead bodies erupted only in her surroundings. It was the same as when she had pronounced herself at Leidenschaftlich's training grounds.

A rain of blood splashed onto the soil. In the middle of the red storm, she was a beautifully sprouting flower.

Manipulating the battle-axe, which was alarming enough just by looking, Violet struck and slashed the enemies. As her gun became unusable, she would steal firearm from them – pistols, bayonets, rifles, anything. She did not show disinclination to use any sort of weapon. Rather, as she stole them, they seemed to become even more vigorous in her hands.

Even against soldiers much bigger and stronger than herself, like an acrobat, she jumped about as if dancing, putting her extraordinary physical abilities to use. Her figure as she did so was spectacularly awe-inspiring. She possessed the strength of a thousand in body and weapon techniques.

The Leidenschaftlich troops came in a little bit after into the hell of agonized shrieks that enemy camp had been turned into. The victory belonged to the Leidenschaftlich Army's Special Offense Force.

The battle had been triggered by the fact Gilbert's troop was moving to the next battlefield. Whether by information leakage or a true coincidence, they had bumped onto the enemy unit of earlier and suddenly broken into combat.

After leaving the torture of the war prisoners to someone else, Gilbert Bougainvillea walked in a straight line while showing his appreciation to the troopers confirming the damage each person had received. Before his field of vision was Violet, who sat on the ground holding the battle-axe and leaning against one of the military trucks with her eyes closed.

"Violet, I've brought water." He showed her the tubular water bottle in his hand.

Violet opened her eyes in a flash, accepted the bottle and, after momentarily bringing it to her lips, she downed the water over her head. Blood and mud were washed off her face.

"Don't you have any injuries? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"Major, there are no issues. A bullet grazed my shoulder but the bleeding has already stopped." The bandages underneath her combat uniform were dyed black with blood. A first-aid kit lay on the ground.

Despite being the one who had contributed most in the previous battle, no one expressed gratitude towards her other than Gilbert. Everyone merely observed from afar, as if a fence had been placed around her.

“You should rest inside. I’ve had a car with nothing but gear be cleaned up. It will take a couple of hours to reach the supplying city. Go sleep.” Gilbert pointed at the unit’s largest vehicle.

Violet nodded, staggering towards it as she dragged the battle-axe along. She hopped onto the military truck with a convertible top, squatting on a spot made for a single person to sleep in. Immediately, she fell into slumber.

After confirming that Violet had entered the car, Gilbert started giving orders to the other soldiers. The entire troop left that land behind, earnestly driving away.

The sun was setting, the sky changing from orange to dark cobalt, when the unit finally arrived at its destination. The city was the base of Leidenschaftlich’s army divisions. Gilbert’s troops were welcomed and greeted by comrades at the dormitory. They would stay there for a few days.

Gilbert briefly told those who were uninjured to “not overstep the boundaries” as an implicit form of scolding while giving them permission to go outside. In the end, the number of Special Force members that had remained in the dormitory was small. Violet’s slept in her room, which was the only private lodging instead of a shared one.

“Major. Major, you don’t have to.” As Gilbert headed for her room with a tray of dinner, one of the local division’s members nervously called out to him. “I will carry it.” the young man said while offering to take the tray, but Gilbert shook his head.

“It’s been said a few times before, but since some of our personnel wound up coming back as corpses, this is my job.”

“Eh, ‘corpses’…? Were… they killed by that woman? Is that… Violet?”

“That’s right. Well, when we asked about it, we were told it was because they were guilty of actions that would have unavoidably resulted in their

deaths either way…" although his explanation was indistinct, anyone not disproportionately naïve could understand the implications in it.

"Is that why she's getting a room for herself?"

There was not much of a reaction. In the eyes of other members, it probably seemed like Violet was receiving special treatment, since she was a girl soldier. Or was it because she was the object of Gilbert's affections? There were many ways to see her in a lewd light.

Gilbert spit out a sentence that he had already become used to saying, "She's substantially our unit's most skilled member. In normal circumstances, she would have a suitable medal on her chest and you would be supposed to salute her. But since she's unfortunately kept a secret, she can at least be treated in accordance to her achievements. Anyhow… even if your offer was out of courtesy, I can't accept it. If there is anything I might want help with in the future, I'll count on you. Step aside."

The young man had a complex expression, but bowed and left regardless. As the sounds of his footsteps grew farther, Gilbert sighed.

——*Makes me want a tattoo saying "don't ask" on my face.*

A few years had passed ever since he had taken in the little Violet. No matter where he went or whom he met, he would be sought after for explanations regarding her existence. There was no helping it.

A plausible rumor ran amongst the Leidenschaftlich army: that the son of the Bougainvillea family, the country's heroes, kept a girl soldier who was celebrated as a War Goddess. It also seemed she was referred to as "Leidenschaftlich's Warrior Maiden" – a nickname someone had come up with. It was not a title given to a mere girl soldier. That was when men had started to surround her often, and people who had created a monster-like image for her began spreading by word of mouth, after meeting her in person, that she was like a witch with the face of an angel. Having an underling with a demonic beauty and natural-born outstanding prominence in battle gave him a hard time as a boss.

——*I’ve raised her to be too worthy of her name.*

The tableware clanged as Gilbert climbed up the dorm’s old wooden stairs. Although various parts of the division had received cautioning not to go near her room, he found numerous men attempting to peek into it and barked at them. Just calling their names was enough to make them leave. He sighed again as he would have to arrange for their unit’s leader to give them punishment.

He opened the door after knocking. “Violet.”

At the call, she raised her head from her curled up position on the mattress, wearing an oversized men’s shirt.

“Let’s eat.” Gilbert, who had brought his own share along, put it on the table at the corner of the room and sat on the accompanying chair. He then handed her share to her on the tray. “Can you hold it… with that arm?”

“Thank you very much. The right side is unharmed.”

As she graciously bowed in gratitude, there was nothing in her actions that he could say to resemble the time they had met. Her body was also morphing from the one of a girl to that of a woman with the passage of the years.

“Major… are you all right with not going out?”

After telling Violet to eat up as she was holding the spoon without touching the meal, Gilbert replied, “The reports have been accumulating, and there’s also a meeting to decide the next battle’s strategy. Playing around is other people’s work. It’s another story if you want to go outside, though. You would have been allowed if you had gone with someone.”

“With whom?”

“Who knows? Anyone is fine.”

Violet shook her head in negation. She did not speak to the comrades who worked in the same unit. It was probably due to the so-called ‘one

tablespoon of fear and two teaspoons of tactlessness'. Those who continuously watched her fight from up close would inevitably want to keep a distance. Gilbert was acquiescent, but that did not apply to everyone.

——*This is nothing much.*

Just like that, she had grown up rarely ever talking to anyone other than him.

——*However, if she becomes attached to someone else, it would be a problem.*

That had to do with his concerns about his 'weapon' being stolen, but lately, there were also forbidden emotional reasons involved.

"If you're lacking anything, just ask a female officer to buy it for you. Or do you want to do that yourself?"

"No, I have everything I need, so it is fine."

"Since you don't use your savings, they've piled up… you're a teenager now, so it's okay to buy an accessory or two. There might not be many opportunities to wear it, but it's good just having one."

"What is a 'teenager'?"

"Kids who look as old as you are. You appear to be… a little… older, though."

Four years had passed since the two of them had first met, without Gilbert ever finding out her actual age. Supposing she was ten at the time, she now was fourteen. Were she normal, Violet would still have cherubic face. Yet her extremely sophisticated features erased that innocence and made her look like a mature woman.

After teaching her how to speak, Gilbert had tried questioning her about her past, but she did not have memories prior to meeting Dietfriet. Before

she had realized, Violet had told him, she was in an inhabited island awaiting someone's orders.

"What do teenage girls buy?"

"Let's see… I'm not married and haven't seen my sisters very often after being dispatched to the battlefield, so I can't say much, but… I believe it's things like dresses, brooches, rings and cute dolls."

Violet looked at her battle-axe and military bag placed in the corner of the room. The axe rested behind her lord, wrapped in a dirty cloth. Her baggage consisted of only that.

"I think there's no meaning in me having something of that sort. Just… receiving Witchcraft from Major is enough. The design is just as I had hoped for and it's fairly easy to wield."

The axe she had used in the previous battlefield was a special order-made one that Gilbert had requested for her. The name given to it by the inventor was 'Witchcraft'.

Gilbert smiled bitterly at the fact that it was very much like Violet, who had yearned for a fatal weapon, to not want things that ordinary people would. "If I… had done more for you when you were younger, I wonder if you would have interest in these things."

He had never tried to buy her dresses or dolls. During the four years after meeting Violet, the unit was constantly moving around the continent, never taking a long enough break. Such was the military life. Gilbert, who had just been promoted to Major and carried the responsibility of leading the troops, was always busy with daily affairs, and had made teaching her how to speak his utmost priority. However, it was both hers and Gilbert's achievement that she had managed to build and maintain a solid reputation in the army despite being so disparate. He had spent quite some effort to make that unique girl familiar with society. And he had been successful.

Gilbert stared at Violet. Her creamy skin never darkened, no matter how much it was exposed to the sun. Her facial traits were remarkable even

without make-up.

He had once said she should become worthy of her name. She was developing as he had wished. Her beauty was slightly god-like. It would most certainly become even more elegant if she wore something other than a military uniform. Surely, she could become a flower prettier and tenderer than any woman of nobility.

——*At first, she was supposed to follow that path.*

Gilbert had given her words and taught her manners. She never killed aside from when ordered and for her own protection. Rather, she was like that from the start, even before she had become able to speak. Had he cast his fears away and sent her to an appropriate caregiver organization, she might have moved on with her life without ever having contact with the battlefield. As result of being taken under Gilbert's wing, Violet had been shot, her exhausted body resting on the bed as she sipped a cold soup. It made him feel miserable.

"Violet, tomorrow… no, the day after… I will make some time, so why don't we go outside together for a bit?"

"Why?"

"You've become taller, and you haven't bought clothes for a while now, right? Let's get some."

"The ones I'm being provided with suffice."

"You're not being provided with sleepwear, are you? It's very worn-out." Gilbert pointed at her shirt's sleeve.

He always left the purchasing of her daily necessity items to female officers standing by and had never done it himself. Her sleeping garments had all become stained from killing perpetrators, so he had merely lent his own to her as temporary measure.

Even though she was not attached to anything else, Violet refused, as if the items she received from Gilbert were exceptions. “But… it’s something that Major gave me, so I can still wear it.”

Gilbert’s voice softened naturally at her lovable attitude, “I don’t want you to wear… negligees like the ones you used to when you were smaller in the dorms, but there are similar things that are just as comfortable. No, it doesn’t have to be sleepwear. It can be something you want to eat.”

“If Major wants to go out, I will wait here. You will be at ease if I do not leave the room, right? If I lock it up, people cannot get in either.” She gestured to represent someone sneaking into her bed. “I cannot hold back when I am injured, after all.”

Violet was self-conscious about killing people. It was commendable that she made use of her unstoppable defense instinct to restrain all those who attempted to violate her, but murdering comrades was going too far. She was aware that Gilbert kept her at a distance from others for the sake of protecting them.

“I… you… I want to… go outside with you. Just once in a while… would you let me act like a parent?”

It was a slightly forceful excuse, but if Gilbert had married early, it would not be odd for him to have a child about as old as Violet. He had taught her everything, from language to day-by-day lifestyle. Their relationship could be described as parent and child, older brother and younger sister, teacher and student…

“Major is… not my father. I do not have any parents. It is strange to use Major as replacement for that.”

…and, of course, superior and subordinate. Her delicate voice pierced Gilbert’s chest.

“Even if… you think that… for me, you are…”

——*You are…*

He could not properly go on. What was she for him? What word defined her best? ‘Weapon’ might be the most appropriate. Nevertheless, it was clearly inconsistent to be protective of a mere ‘weapon’ out of self-awareness for her being of the opposite sex. In that case, she was either his ‘daughter’ or ‘little sister’. Still, no matter how much he tried to copy family-like actions, she did not pay much attention to them, and did not treat him as such.

Violet herself did not think of Gilbert as her parent. Although he was of a higher status, if Violet did not see him as above of herself, once she turned her fangs at him, he would automatically be done for, and the reasons why they had their current kind of relationship was that Violet sought his orders and possessed grandiose fighting attributes. Between them was an interchangeable cooperation – he gave her instructions in the battlefield and she lent him her strength for victory. Such was the immutable truth.

“I… you…”

Gilbert and Violet did not have any actual relation.

“I…”

Watching as Gilbert shut his mouth, Violet’s eyes moved about in a rare display of confusion. “If Major wishes, I will go.” she told him, “If Major orders me to…”

“It’s not an order…”

“If… it is your desire…”

No matter what, Violet did not let him have any hopes. Yet Gilbert smiled, regardless of feeling so awful, as she attempted to comfort his dejected self. “Yeah, it is my desire, so please fulfill it.”

Once the smile appeared on his face, Violet exhaled deeply as if relieved and nodded. “Yes, Major.”

She was almost like a doll.

On the evening of two days after, for the first time in the four years they had spent together, the two went outside for matters unrelated to their jobs. Gilbert had somehow managed to get free time by starting work early, and went to pick her up in her room.

He had informed his co-workers that he would be leaving the headquarters, but instead of receiving cold looks, he and Violet were seen off by the members of their unit as if the latter were witnessing something exceptional. In Violet's case, just stepping outside was already rare. In Gilbert's case, since he was normally busy with documents and meetings with stakeholders, he personally never had time to go out. The reason he had presented for his leave was that he had a 'compromise', so perhaps everyone believed he was off to work. Not being interrogated about it was favorable for him.

They headed downtown on foot. Being side-by-side was only the usual, but walking around the city beside Violet as she was clad in a skirt made Gilbert feel ticklish. He wound up constantly side-glancing her.

The sky had become a bit dark. Street lamps illuminated the shopping district. Strings with lanterns linked the buildings sandwiched between one another on each side of the large road, imitating the brilliance of stars. The weather was warm, the atmosphere suitable for having a drink while listening to cheerful music. Yet neither Gilbert nor Violet smiled as though enjoying themselves, only walked expressionlessly.

The duo entered a big clothing store that was still open. It was a strange shop, with clothes hanging from ceiling to floor. Perhaps because that was the city where the army headquarters were located, as the two soldiers came in, they were welcomed without any reactions of surprise.

"This looks good. This looks good too."

The shopkeeper was a woman in her forties. She spoke to Violet as if choosing clothes for her own daughter to try out.

As Violet stood still with a troubled attitude, Gilbert spoke on her behalf, "These are too flashy. Any color looks good on her… but don't forget

she’s a combatant.”

“Then, how about this, Mister?”

“It has a fine design. I will stay here, so please pick undergarments as well at your own discretion.”

The shopkeeper gently touched Violet’s chest, her face growing sour. “Really. It feels like the ones she’s wearing don’t match her size.”

As the two women disappeared into the backroom, Gilbert was finally able to breathe. He put a hand to his mouth and turned to the side, glad they had not seen his cheeks go bright red.

“Thank you for buying so much stuff! Come again.”

It was further into the evening when their shopping for clothes ended and the shopkeeper saw them off. They could have gone home at that point, but Gilbert changed his mind as Violet stopped to observe the road glittering with lanterns.

“It is as if the stars have descended to the earth.”

Since they were already there, he decided to look around the evening downtown area. First, they went to the drink stalls. Liquor joints with alcohol collected from various placed and food carts with broiled meat and fried potatoes attracted customers from everywhere with their delicious smells. Some who appeared to be already tipsy sang merrily, a band playing an improvised tune to match them. People gathered to the seemingly entertaining atmosphere, dancers taking advantage of it to earn coins.

As the two walked forward, the number of shops that dealt with food decreased, giving space to a line-up of street vendors who sold precious gems and ethnic accessories. Gilbert had heard from a member who had enjoyed his break from the very first day that the shops changed from day to nighttime, but the two of them did not know the daytime assortment.

However, although the number of people did not differ much, unlike the previous liveliness, that part of the district had a more serene air.

It did not seem like anything had particularly sparkled Violet's interest, but upon going there, her feet halted for a moment.

"Is there anything you want?"

"No…" she denied, but her eyes continued staring in the same direction.

Gilbert held her by the arm and took her for a closer look by force.

"Welcome." The good-natured elderly shopkeeper greeted courteously.

Glass boxes containing jewels lay in rows over a black velvet carpet placed on the floor. Gilbert could not tell if they were genuine, but felt that the workmanship put in them was more elaborate and elegant than the goods of the other sellers. Violet keenly examined the products and Gilbert flinched when she directed her gaze at him as if to shoot him dead with it.

"What is it…?"

"Major's eyes are here." Violet pointed to a gem. Her slender white finger stretched straight ahead, toward an emerald brooch.

Certainly, it did resemble the mysterious color of Gilbert's irises. It was a big, shiny oval, blooming from within its glass box in a more conspicuously gorgeous way than the other jewels.

"What… do you call this?"

While Violet opened her mouth and frowned as if she could not get the word out, the shopkeeper offered assistance, "Emerald."

"Not… the name…"

"If it's not the name, what did you mean?"

“When I… saw this… I wondered what kind of word would be fitting for it…”

“So that’s what it was.” The shopkeeper laughed at her. “It’s ‘beautiful’, Young Lady.”

From the shopkeeper’s viewpoint, laughing was the obvious reaction. He was a jewelry merchant. It was surely a word ingrained to his routine. Yet Violet, who was more worthy of it than anyone else, felt her mouth ruminate as she pronounced for the first time the term she had just learned.

“‘Beautiful’…”

“What’s… with you? Did you not know that word?”

“I did not know ‘beautiful’. Does it have the same meaning as… ‘pretty’?”

“Is that true? My, I’m surprised. You seem so intelligent…”

——*Ah, what a situation.*

Gilbert stood flabbergasted between the two. His body grew intolerably hot. The feeling was similar to committing a terrible blunder, with cold sweat, racing heartbeats and embarrassment burning his insides.

He was the one who had taught her how to speak. During the four years they had lived together, he had trained with her the necessary for everyday conversations. That included military jargon.

——*Still, I…*

He had not taught her a word so simple. Once she had learned how to talk to a certain extent, he might have thought she would logically know other words. He had measured her linearly, on his own accord, even though she used to be a little girl who could say nothing other than ‘major’.

“Are you a war orphan?”

“No, but I do not have parents.”

She did not seek any word apart from ‘kill’. After taking her in and becoming her guardian, he had only brought her to battlefields. Today had been their first day going out for a shopping trip like that.

——*Ah… there I was, talking about acting like a parent, and yet…*

He had not properly taught words to her at all. It was extremely disconcerting.

——*To think I’ve never said “beautiful”, even though I can say “kill”… even though the word truly matches her…*

While Gilbert fell deep into regret, the chatter went on.

“What about writing? Can you do it?”

“Only my name…”

“Whoever gave birth to you is incompetent, then. Even I can write.”

“Is it a good thing to know how to write?”

“You’d be able to write letters.”

“Letters…?”

“If you live far from your hometown, you should at least write some.”

“Is that so…?”

Gilbert slammed his wallet onto a glass box to interrupt their exchange.

“Wait, you… can’t do that. The goods…”

“I’m buying one… Violet, choose.” he said in a low tone, as if angered.

Violet blinked. “Is that an order?”

“Yes, it is… choose something. Anything is fine.”

The truth was that he had not wanted to call it an order. However, he did not think she would obediently listen had he said otherwise.

Violet looked at the glass boxes again and, as expected, pointed back to the emerald brooch. “Then, this one.”

As Gilbert pressured the shopkeeper with a stiff expression, the latter simply smiled and handed over the brooch while saying, “Come again anytime.” Being it a pricy brooch, it was only evident that, as the shop’s owner, he would be as satisfied as possible.

Accepting the brooch, Gilbert pulled Violet by the arm once more and left the spot. The streets were packed with people that had come to enjoy the evening city. Within the crowd, the two of them, usually always questioned about their relationship and existence no matter where they went, were but a part of the congestion.

As Violet was not used to multitudes, her eyes moved about in every direction and her legs lagged. In the process, their hands let go of one another and both became separated. It was then that Gilbert finally turned back to look at Violet. Her golden hair was hidden in the mass of bodies.

“Major.”

He could hear her call amidst the noise. Regardless of how many people were there or of not being able to see her, there was no way he would miss that voice. Always, ever since the first time she had said ‘major’, her wind chime-like timbre had been engraved in his ears. He hurried to go a few ways back from the path they had come.

“Violet…”

Violet stared at the flustered Gilbert with a tranquil expression as he breathed heavily. It seemed getting lost had not made her the slightest bit nervous.

“Major, what should I do with this… now that I have it?” she showed him the brooch that she had been holding firmly all along.

“Clasp it somewhere you’d like.”

“I will end up losing it.”

Gilbert sighed. “In a battle, yes. But you can just wear it on your days off. Though, since your eyes are blue, maybe it would have been better to have bought something also blue.”

Violet shook her head at the last sentence. “No, this one was the most ‘beautiful’.” She said as she pierced the brooch’s needle into her clothes, “It’s the same color as Major’s eyes.”

Her assertion was clear. Gilbert’s breath caught for a second at the words said by her sweet tone.

——*Why… are you… saying that my eyes are beautiful… at a time like this?*

Even though she was a girl who acted as if she had no heart, she worshiped the man that had raised her without teaching her how to express emotions.

——*I have… no right… to be told such things.*

Without having any clue about what Gilbert was thinking, Violet continued, “I have always… thought they were ‘beautiful’. But I did not know the word, so I had never said it.” As if she could not accurately put the brooch on, she thrust the needle continuously. “But Major’s eyes, from the moment we met, were ‘beautiful’.”

Gilbert’s vision blurred at the whispered words. It was only for an instant. His eyes were soon able to capture the world clearly again as he pushed back whatever was burning within him.

——*Erase your feelings. You can’t let yourself be seen with a face like this.*

Suppressing his sentiments and pleasures had been paying off. Working as a soldier required that in particular.

“Let me…” he took the brooch from her hand and put it on her instead.

Violet dropped her gaze to the twinkling of the gem on her collar.

“Major, thank you very much.” Her voice had become a little fainter. “Thank you very much.”

As he was repeatedly told so, he grew uncomfortable and his chest felt like it was being boiled.

——*I can’t… say anything. I don’t have the right to.*

He pondered on how relieved his heart would be if he earnestly put his thoughts into words. Guilt, regret, bitterness, frustration, anger, sorrow. The soup of feelings mixed up in his head was about to overflow.

The battlefield suddenly changed a few days after. The continental war that had begun with a monetary conflict between North and South and the religious conflicts between West and East, which broke out in the same

period, interconnected and made the circumstances even more complicated. Gilbert and the Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich's Army were not usually dispatched to large-scale, definite battlefields, but to smaller ones in different places. The role of bringing things to an early end was up to the Raid Unit. And diversified battles – in other words, skirmishes – spread steadfastly in the continent. They were not easy clashes in which the opposing forces collided at only one area.

The extensive battlefield shared by the defense lines of the northern invasion and southern inhibition was named Intense. It based itself right in the middle of the continent. The entirety of its region consisted of sacred lands, according to the religion shared by the countries of West and East. It was a city made of stone and the largest supply center in the southwestern territory. Desiring to take possession of the West side of the sacred lands, the East lent their strength to the North as an allied nation, and consequently, the West joined the South.

It was three in the morning when a report informing that Intense's defense lines had been destroyed arrived. Said defense lines, which had been full of military camps, were rapidly annihilated by the North's attacks, going into a continuous state of abeyance. At the same time, smaller conflicts in various areas were settling down. The details of the incident denoted that the North, which lacked natural resources from the very beginning, and the East, which had offered it support, had become unable to draw supplies, quietly focusing their military forces on Intense, betting everything in an all-out confront.

The Southwest camps, which had been unprepared to respond immediately to surprise attacks of overwhelming difference in power, resumed moving forward. Orders of convocation were delivered to Gilbert and his unit, which belonged to the Allied Union of the Southwest Nations and had heard the report on the defense lines' breakthrough. A messenger had come to officially announce that every soldier there assembled was meant to take part in the decisive battle, in which all armies would gather.

It seemed the Northeast allied nations' troops had already reached the sacred grounds and taken control of it. In reality, the next battle was not simply for a replenishment site or reclaiming of sacred lands – it would be

a full-fledged final battle. Whichever was unsuccessful would clearly have their constrained territories and countries robbed by the enemy. Platoons that had been directed to various places congregated at a stronghold established in the outskirts of Intense's sacred grounds.

It was late into the night when Gilbert and the others arrived in the headquarters. At the camping, he reunited with Hodgins after so long.

"You were alive." This time, it was Gilbert who found Hodgins and patted his shoulder.

The red-haired man smiled broadly as he turned around. "Gilbert… hey. So you were alive too. Were you worried about me? Many of my subordinates died, but… I survived."

He was responsible for a part of the troops stationed at Intense. His fatigue and pessimism of losing his companions were not hidden underneath his smile. He had laughed at his own joke, but the bags under his eyes were deep and his face was dirty.

While changing locations, Gilbert and his troop had taken a look around the site of Intense's defense line's battlefield, but found nothing other than a heap of corpses that had not been condoned scattered on the ground. There had not been even time to offer a silent prayer – all were supposed to prepare for the decisive battle.

The conditions were likely hard to bear for Hodgins, as those had been comrades he entrusted his life with and confided in on a daily basis. However, the moment he saw Violet as she came along, he finally showed a genuinely cheerful look. "Is this… that small girl?"

"Violet. That's how I named her…"

"You… can come up with some pretty pompous names. Little Violet, huh? Well, this isn't your first meeting with me, but you don't remember it, do you? I'm an one-sided acquaintance of yours. Call me 'Major Hodgins'."

Holding a cup of the soup that was being distributed, Violet saluted him. Even in the darkness, her fascinating looks hypnotized him for a moment, highlighted by the lamp-fire. Gilbert cleared his throat, bringing him back to reality.

“You’ve become a beauty…” Hodgins put an arm over Gilbert’s shoulder and spoke in a low voice as both turned their backs to Violet, “You… this is… really bad, y’know? A young woman like this in a combat area… well, I mean… it doesn’t seem like there’s any need to be wary of her body… even my corps know about her deeds.”

“I’m keeping an eye on Violet so there’s no need to worry.”

“That may be, but… how can I put it? It’s a waste. It’s not as if physical strength is the only gift she was endowed with from birth. It would… be great if she had a job that made use of her other attributes.”

The words pierced Gilbert’s heart. It was quite painful to hear his thoughts being pointed out by someone else. Moreover, the cause of everything was Gilbert himself. After all, while being her guardian, he was first and foremost a military officer who willingly made her fight.

——*I know that… better than anyone.*

No matter how stunning she was or how much she seemed to brim with other talents, for as long as she was chained to a soldier such as Gilbert, she would be but an automated assassin doll.

“Y’know, I… am thinking about quitting the military and opening my own business once this war is over. When that happens… I wonder if I should invite… little Violet.” Hodgins took a cigarette out of the box that had become crumbled and put it in his mouth.

Since there was only one cigarette in the box, it was grabbed by Gilbert. He was not foolish enough to not accept the offer of his friend in the night right before the decisive battle after countless weeks of not smoking. Bringing their faces close to one another, the two of them shared the fire.

“When a soldier says something like this right before the last battlefield, it normally means ‘that’.” Gilbert said with a grim expression while exhaling smoke.

“No, I won’t die! Absolutely. I’ve actually been thinking for a while now about buying an existing company…”

“Where would you get the money for that?”

“From a wager at a certain gambling organization, in which we bet our whole fortunes on who would win this battle.”

“Why… do you lead such an ephemeral lifestyle…?”

“Y’see, I don’t come from a household of mostly soldiers. My family runs an ordinary business back in our country. And I’m the second son. I joined the army because the one who would succeed the family business was my older brother. If there is anything an unemployed second son can contribute to his family with, that would be protecting it by protecting the country, right? That’s why, if the South wins and Leidenschaftlich doesn’t have to fight anymore even if just for one hour less, I’ll open my own agency. Y’know, I’m the kind of guy that can do anything if I put my mind into it, so I could rise a few more ranks if I stayed in the army like this, but… something about that felt wrong. I’ve finally understood what.”

Gilbert was sincerely envious of Hodgins as he shyly spoke of his dreams. They might not have a tomorrow. In such circumstances, his friend was able to say that there were things he wished to do and plan a future with them. There could be people who would laugh it off as silly, but Gilbert saw it as something dazzling.

——*I have nothing that I want to do, and can’t think of any other place I could go.*

He had come that far by acting as expected of a child born into the noble military family that was Bougainvillea.

——*Then, what about Violet?*

She sat on the ground at a little distance, staring at the bonfire. As she was always on Gilbert's side, no one would call out to her, but he could feel in his skin that the gazes of the soldiers in the camp were concentrated on her. She was not suited for such space.

——*Supposing she could… live the rest of her life clad in prettier clothes, fitting of a teenage girl like herself… No, it's fine if they aren't pretty. If she could live in a place… where she would be able to take actions on her own will, and not by my orders… I feel… that she would be able… to gain something more unique from it.*

"Right. If your business is safe, I might end up leaving her to your care."

Gilbert had aptitude for the military. He never felt any anxiety or fear when receiving promotions in the army. God had bestowed him with a destiny that matched him perfectly.

As Hodgins was did not anticipate that he would receive consent, he was about to drop the cigarette as he uttered a "Hah?", as if to request for repetition.

Violet, who had been silent, slowly reacted and raised her head in their direction.

"Like I said, if it's appropriate for Violet, I might leave her to your care…"

"Really!? I'm taking that as a pledge! Write a testimony!"

Gilbert coughed as he was grabbed by the collar of his uniform's jacket and shaken back and forth. "I said 'might'! It's not confirmed!"

"M-My business will definitely require a girl that can travel to dangerous areas without hesitation…"

"If you'll make her do dangerous things, I refuse."

"Well, even if I say it's dangerous… it's… not like I'd be the patron."

“Let’s continue this discussion later. See you, Hodgins.”

“Hey, Gilbert! Don’t forget what you said just now no matter what! No matter what, got it!?”

Ignoring Hodgins’s coaxing, Gilbert took Violet with him back to their tent. They would be spending the night by themselves. Since several troops were gathered together, there were not enough accommodations for everyone, and Violet could not have a room for herself. Additionally, if she were appointed to the other big tents, there would be a risk of people attempting inappropriate actions and the number of soldiers decreasing right before battle.

The tent both were directed to was meant for keeping luggage and had a limited space to lie down in. If they happened to turn around while sleeping, their bodies would surely touch. Gilbert realized he was strangely nervous about that fact.

——*No, but… I went home with her in my arms when we first met.*

Back when she was covered in blood and did not know how to talk, although he was terrified, he had still embraced her. All the while, she had watched him as if he were something mysterious. In the present moment, as he observed her profile while she let her hair down, despite having developed into a slender young lady, she was still a girl age-wise. However, her mature features appeared to be nothing other than that of a woman, and within her body dwelled the soul of a fierce warrior.

Perhaps because Gilbert was staring, Violet turned to look at him. Their gazes locked.

“Major.” She called in low tone, as if about to tell a secret.

“What is it?” He asked back in the same manner.

“What… should I do… later on?”

“What do you mean…? Tomorrow is the last battle. We will fulfill our duties as the Offense Force.”

“No, I mean after tomorrow. What should I do when tomorrow ends? Major, you… were talking about it with Major Hodgins. That you would entrust me to his care.”

“You were listening?”

Violet was expressionless as usual, yet her voice sounded oddly nervous.

“That… hasn’t been decided yet.”

As Gilbert spoke in a mud-dent manner, Violet inquired, “Am I… no longer necessary?”

“Violet?”

“Am I going to be transferred to Major Hodgins… as a result of being disposed of? Will I be unable to receive Major’s orders?” The questions denounced that she thought of herself as a ‘thing’. “I… most likely… cannot take Major Hodgins’s orders. I myself… do not… understand it very well… but I cannot move if not by the orders of those whom I’ve acknowledged. That is why… I would be the most useful… staying by Major’s side.”

Gilbert’s face clouded at the machine-like sentence. “Do you… want my orders that much?”

He was a superior who would say nothing but “kill”. Such was the kind of parent that had raised her. Such was the kind of man that he was.

“Orders are my everything. And… if they are not given by Major… I…”

——*Why… am I feeling so miserable again…?*

Things were always the same. Violet would admonish him while thinking of herself as a tool. She would do so even without anyone wishing for it.

Such was her nature. Such was her way of life. Such was the kind of being she was.

——*Still, why…*

It was too hard for him to continue seeing her that way.

——*…does… it…*

“Why… does it… have… to… be me?”

“Eh?”

His mutter had been one that could not be heard, regardless of how close they were. Gilbert painfully spit words out with an expression of frankness that he had never showed Violet before, “After this battle… you don’t have to take my orders anymore. I… plan to let you go. You should do as you please as well. You don’t have to listen to anyone’s orders. Act on your own will. You can… live by yourself anywhere now, right?”

“But… if I did that, whose orders would I…”

“Do not listen to anyone’s orders.”

With the face she was making, Violet was but a young girl. It made him want to ask why she was going to a battlefield. Why was her body inclined for war? Why did she entrust herself to other people and become their tool?

——*Why did she… choose me as her Master?*

“Is that… an order?” as though rejecting the idea, Violet desperately appealed with little change in her expression, “Is that Major’s order?”

——*Aah… why? How come?*

“That’s… not… it…”

“But you said ‘do not listen’…”

——*Aah, that's not it.*

The frustration of things not going as he wanted seethed within his head and burst out. "Why… do you think of everything as an order no matter what?! Do you… really believe I see you as a tool? If that were the case, I would not have held the little you in my arms or made sure that no bugs would sit on you as you grew up! Regardless of anything… you don't realize… how I feel… about you. Normally… anyone would… surely understand. Even when I'm angry, even when things are hard, I…!" He could see the reflection of his pathetic face on Violet's orbs. "I… Violet…"

Those blue eyes were always looking at Gilbert. However, it was the same for his green ones. Before he realized, he would avert his eyes towards her. From a month to four years, they would go anywhere together.

"Ma… jor…"

From the moment her rosy lips had said her first word, Gilbert had done all he could to protect her. He was also a mere young man when they had first met, and did not know left or right about raising children.

"Do you not have feelings? That's not it, right? It's not as if you have none. Isn't that right? If you didn't have feelings, then what is this face? You can make a face like that, can't you? You have feelings. You have… a heart just like mine, right!?"

His yelling could probably be heard in the nearby tents. Thinking about the other party for a second, he felt his chest tighten. He did not have the right to lecture her so conceitedly.

"I do not… understand… feelings." Violet said with a trembling voice, as if to indicate she did not know that her expression was of apprehension.

"You… think I'm scary right now… right? You didn't like… that I suddenly yelled, right?"

"I do not know."

“You’re irritated at being told things that you don’t comprehend, right?”

“I do not… know. I do not know.”

“That’s a lie…”

“I do not know.” Violet shook her head, appealing seriously. “Major, I really… don’t know.”

She was missing something essential as a person. Even if she had feelings, she could not perceive them. She had been raised that way.

——*Who… is to blame for this?*

Gilbert put a hand over his lids and closed his eyes. That way, he could no longer see her face. All he could hear was the sound of her breathing. He could not see any of her.

“Major.” As he rejected reality, Violet’s voice echoed in his ears. “I do not… understand myself. Why was I made so different from other people? Why can’t I… listen to orders from anyone except for Major…?” She sounded extremely hopeless. “Only, when I… first met Major, I thought to myself, ‘follow this person’.”

Just by listening to her, he could tell how young she was even if he did not want to.

“While wondering what was being said amidst the whirlpool of words I could not discern, the fact that Major embraced me first-thing… that was… probably… what did it for me. There has never been anyone who did that for me… then or now… with the intention of protecting me. That is why… I want… to listen to Major’s orders. If I… have Major’s orders, I can go anywhere.”

Ever a child, she earnestly sought for Gilbert alone.

——*Who… is to blame for this?*

After a moment of silence, Gilbert whispered lowly, “Violet, I’m sorry.” He opened his eyes and extended a hand towards her, placing the blanket over her body up to her mouth line. “I ended up talking as if I was accusing you of something you’re not at fault for… I’d like you to forgive me. Tomorrow is… the decisive battle. The expectations of many lie on your strength. So, go to sleep. Let’s talk later… about what we’ll do after that.” He used the gentlest tone he could manage.

“Yes.” Violet sighed in relief. “I will definitely try to be of use. Goodnight, Major.”

“Aah… goodnight, Violet.”

There was a slovenly rustling for a moment, but soon, Gilbert could hear the regular sounds of sleeper’s breathing. Turning his back to Violet, he attempted to induce sleep into his body the same way as she had. However, tears overflowed from within his closed eyes.

——*The insides of my lids feel hot. It’s like my eyeballs are burning.*

The tears that had accumulated for so long that he could no longer stand it poured down incessantly. He did his best not to let his voice leak. Bringing a hand to his face, he endured the pain in his chest.

——*Who… is to blame for this?*

That was all he could think about.

A gigantic wall of stone protected Intense’s sacred grounds. Its outward appearance gave off a vicious atmosphere, yet the inside had a structure almost like that of a box garden, containing a complex waterway, windmills and an open field. There was only one entrance and one exit. A long single road, named the Pilgrimage Road, ran into the center of the town, the slope increasing as it progressed, ending at a cathedral. It sheltered scriptures that credibly depicted the Continental Genesis and the several gods worshiped in the whole continent, as well as their ancient battles and what would happen during the apocalypse.

The place was regarded as sacred due to being where the cathedral in which the original scriptures were kept had been built. The Continental Genesis described the characteristics and actions of the gods, and ultimately, original scriptures were the most accurate object of faith, no matter which gods one believed in. It was a land of peace where all sects met by chance through the diffusion of the original materials. Gilbert and the Southwest Army had to break into said land of peace and reclaim it.

“The problem is coming up with an infiltration method.”

Early in the morning, while the sun was not yet rising, the commanders reconfirmed their plans in a meeting. As a surviving leader, Hodgins was entrusted with the progress of the main strategies. He drew small diagrams and wrote notes with a feather pen over a luggage box. “There is only one gateway”, “The town is like a garden”, “Capture would be troublesome”. According to Hodgins, who had unceasingly battled in the Intense defense lines, there existed an order of knights to protect the scriptures in the sacred grounds, and a groundwater path had been made for dispatch in the occasion of anyone attempting to steal the originals.

“The main forces will engage in a defense-offense battle at the gates. We thought of hand-climbing the walls for a surprise attack, but the they are too enormous. It’s impossible. In the meantime we would be making a ladder, the morale of the troops would drop and the northeast would make of the sacred grounds their citadel. That’s when I would like to rely on the irregular forces allied to the Southwest Union, which have turned out in great numbers. First, Major Gilbert of the Leidenschaftlich Army’s Special Offense Force.”

Beckoned by Hodgins, Gilbert raised his hand. Other than his, the names of the four raid units’ commanders, who had joined forces with Leidenschaftlich, were called. They were separate units formed in different countries. It was the first time the members met face-to-face.

“To tell the truth, the scriptures kept in the cathedral for pilgrim worship are a copy. The originals were moved to another place by the Order immediately after the invasion of the Northeast Army. I don’t know whether or not the enemy has noticed this… but the underground

aqueducts are still usable, so we'll have the Raid Unit sneak in from there. Squad 1 will take control of the cathedral and fire a signal flare after the suppression to declare victory. Obviously, it will be a farce, but causing disturbance is an effective blow. Squads 2 and 3 will head to the center of the city. The battle will concentrate in the only entrance. Watchdogs will probably dispersed around the town, of course, but if we don't distribute our military forces, the suppression will be impossible. The enemy will be surprised by the victory declaration and come climbing up the long, long Pilgrimage Road, so we'll shoot them down. Squad 4 will attack as vanguard for the gateway's breakthrough."

Selected as Squad 1 was Gilbert's unit. Whichever position it were placed in, the dangers would not change, but they would be responsible for the most important mission.

"I mean, this is a plan based on ideal conditions, but clearly, things won't work so swimmingly in reality. If the Raid Unit fails, there's the option of withdrawing and burning the place from outside. The fields are extensive, so the fire will be big. They will burn faster, after all. It's a roundup… but setting fire to the sacred grounds is unacceptable, emotionally speaking. Please don't hate us, officials of the West Army. We of the South Army are not atheists. I'm not an atheist. But, seriously. This is a last resort. However, now is our only chance. The more time goes by, the more the other side progresses with fortressing Intense's pilgrimage area and the harder it becomes to regain it. The people inside would also suffer more damage. I want to put an end to this resources-starved war, even if it costs smearing the faces of the southwestern countries with mud. Everyone thinks the same, right? The keystone will be… the Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich's Army. We're counting on you."

Being told so with a firm tone, Gilbert replied lowly. "I know. The defense of the cathedral is probably the strongest. But there's no need to worry about it. Leidenschaftlich's… 'weapon' guarantees that. I'd like each unit to be at ease and concentrate on the suppression."

Gilbert's words seemed to infer power into his comrades as they were about to leave for war. All present wished him good luck while raising their hands to shake his. Additionally, the oath contained Gilbert's wishes.

“I really… want this to be the last battle.”

Around the stone fence that surrounded Intense’s sacred grounds was an irrigation channel. It was an waterway deep enough for the water to reach an adult’s waist. Along its course, numerous cascade-like abysses where one would fall underground could be spotted. The interior of the drainage system divided into many paths, and if some led into the city, there should be those that led to the cathedral.

The units started their infiltration while carefully descending an installed ladder. Squads 2, 3 and 4 went separate routes one after the other, and ultimately, only Gilbert and Squad 1 ran their way into the extremely long underground aqueduct. They had strongly believed there would be an ambush awaiting them, disappointed as no signs of it were found.

Some of the troop members were optimistic about the decisive battle to the point of starting lighthearted chatter, but once Gilbert glanced at Violet, he concluded she would not take part in it. The face she made whenever her own life was threatened was still emotionless, yet slightly different from the usual.

——*Violet is… sensitive to danger.*

After a while of running, the intricate irrigation channel’s end could be seen. There was a ladder, and over it was something similar to an iron lid. Beyond it was the outside world.

Violet’s legs completely stopped moving. Everyone else naturally halted as well.

“Major, the enemy is likely already in position above us.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“No, I presumed this because I heard nothing. If I were their commander, I would eradicate the Raid Unit right here while it attempted an exultant invasion. If we simply climb up the ladder and go out there, we will probably be killed. Major, I will go ahead on my own.” Violet stated,

detaching the battle-axe that was made especially for her from the holder on her back.

“You can’t. We don’t know how many we’re against.”

“If they are in big numbers, all the more reason for me to rout the enemies so that everyone can come up safely. Your orders, Major.”

Gilbert’s chest clenched at the word ‘orders’.

“Major, your orders.”

It was like a euphemism for telling her to go die.

“Major!” She was asking him to say such a thing.

Not only Violet’s but everyone else’s gazes centered on Gilbert.

“Is the signal flare ready for use?”

After a short while of planning, everyone lined up against the walls while Violet alone stood positioned beneath the iron lid. Holding firmly onto Witchcraft, she maneuvered the counterweight chain. Twisting her body with all her might, she fired the chain’s tip towards the iron lid. The lid then flew with an outstanding clang. A glimpse of the enemy soldiers’ surprised faces could be seen from the other side. However, before they could shower Violet with bullets, the stretched chain’s tip squeezed a capsule and released the signal flare. The blinding light overwhelmed the enemy soldiers.

“Here I go!”

Violet swiftly climbed up the ladder and disappeared into the ground floor. Soon enough, screams could be heard.

“Alright, we’re climbing too! Let’s go somewhere we can hide ourselves while Violet backs us up!” Gilbert climbed the ladder, leading everyone, as Violet lay great waste to tens of people.

What the underground waterway led to was not the cathedral but a shortcut to it. With their line of sight focused on her, the unit members hurriedly ran towards the building that would work as their shield and concealed themselves.

“Sniper! Prepare!”

The aim was set on the soldiers surrounding Violet. She pushed Witchcraft against the ground, leaping high. As she placed her feet on its extremity, she appeared to be dancing in the air while moving away from the riffle’s mark.

“Fire!!”

The flywheel bullets passed by Violet and reached the soldiers cornering her. At the same time, she spun in the air and took a gun from her military uniform’s holster. Before landing, she shot two enemies who were about to attack Gilbert and the others from the shadows. As her feet touched the soil, she grabbed not Witchcraft’s handle but its chain and turned around. The necks of a few others who attempted to escape flew off. A few paths that had been previously blocked by the enemies were then opened and Violet broke into a run after slaying the vanguard. Everything happened in an instant.

“All men, continueee!!”

At Gilbert’s order, everyone drew their sabers and followed her. There was not a single soul who doubted that small back. Today, their best assassination techniques owner was exerting herself.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!”

The Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich’s army charged towards the cathedral.

Meanwhile, a desperate battle spread at the main gates between South and North. The Suppression Unit led by Hodgins was successful in breaking

through the gates despite the many casualties, engaging in the vicinities of it.

“That was a pretty elegant fight.” With the role of giving directions from behind, Hodgins licked his lips. “Very, very easy for a merchant like me. Too easy. I can clearly see the profits from both the losing and winning sides of this war. Are they really that scared of the town being destroyed? It’s their precious new supplier, after all. The sacred grounds that they saw even in their dreams. Isn’t that right? Isn’t that right?” he raised his voice with a fearless smile. “Support Squad, bring a catapult! Let’s obliterate the windmill that the enemies are using as cover! We’ll bring it down and crush their rear guard! Their soldiers will come one after another, but don’t yield! Whoever can make better use of this fort wins! Teach them which side does it best!”

“Yeah!” shouts of agreement ensued in reply as each warrior acted promptly.

The outcome was not yet visible. However, that also meant they had a chance of winning.

At the back of the slope stretching behind the enemy could be seen the majestic cathedral. Not a single notification had come from there yet.

——*Gilbert, I’m counting on you. I’m dead tired of everything.*

“I’ve been angry since yesterday… no, since forever! Let’s end this stupid war already!” raising his gun, Hodgins entered the cloud of dust to fight alongside his comrades.

“The main forces have started the invasion from the gates. The northeastern units in control of this area are divided into two bands for both the gates and the cathedral. The main General is probably in either of them. In order to be victorious, we must cut his neck and take control of the cathedral. If their morale goes down, we win.”

The members of the Special Offense Force of Leidenschaftlich’s Army were hiding in a nearby building facing the cathedral. They sorted out the

circumstances after listening to correspondent soldiers dispatched from the main gate.

The cathedral that could be seen from the building's windows was protected by such a steel wall-like security that it was almost laughable. Armed soldiers surrounded the periphery of the cylindrical cathedral tower. In contrast, the remaining personnel of the Offense Force was in scarce number. Although the injured had been brought along to the building, they could not be counted, and the cathedral's top was quite a way from the ground. In order to climb onto it, the aboveground gate, which was the only entrance and exit, was the only option. There seemed to be no other hope. However, coming in directly from the front would end in nothing but throwing their lives away unnecessarily. Everyone was exhausted. They had escaped to that place to prepare themselves for the time being, but could not stay there forever.

Despite others sitting on the floor, Violet stood by the window the whole time. Gilbert thought she was watching the enemy, but she seemed to have planned something.

"Major, please look at that building."

He glanced outside. It was a square structure with no peculiarities to it.

"The rooftop is open and the distance to the cathedral is not too great. If it's me, I should be able to jump onto it from here if I do an approach run."

"Evidently, something like that is…"

He believed it was impossible. Although the gap between the building and the cathedral was certainly close, there would be no foothold even if the leap were executed. The fall was visibly fatal.

"There are stained glass windows in the laterals. If I break it and jump inside, it will be a little far from the top but more accessible. Of course, while I do so, it will be necessary to break the glass with firearm. After the firing, our position will soon be discovered. Major and the others should retreat, meet with Squads 2 and 3, and solicit assistance. Taking over the

cathedral will be impossible with our current numbers. Once I arrive at the top, I will fire the flare. Our goal as Squad 1 is to make the enemy think we are in control of the cathedral no matter if it is a lie."

"Even if this works, it means you'd have to fight alone."

"I trust that Major will safely bring everyone back here. I cannot think of any other method. It is absolutely necessary to restrain the other party for us to be victorious."

"Are you prepared to die?"

"I do not know… whether death is something that I must be ready for… or not."

It was the same as saying she was not afraid of it.

"I can't consent."

"Then, do you intend to wait here until the Suppression Unit comes?"

"You are… the one person… that I don't want to sacrifice."

"Myself aside, many of our comrades have died coming to this point. And this is not a sacrifice but an important measure. Major should simply make the right decisions, as always. Please relay them to me. Please command me, no matter what happens… Major. And then, I will… definitely…" Violet canalized her clear purposes into her voice, "… become your 'shield' and 'weapon'." She stared at Gilbert's green orbs as if they were something dazzling. "I will protect you." Her words held no lies. "Please do not ever doubt this. I am 'yours'."

Strangely enough, the corners of Violet's lips slightly curled upwards. Gilbert had never seen her smile. Out of all things, she was doing so in such a timing after spouting such a sentence. It was terribly frustrating, sad and maddening.

Gilbert balled a fist. "I understand it perfectly now."

“May I ask what?”

——*I…*

“What is best… and what is worst.”

——*I cannot compare you to anyone else. Even if countless of my underlings die, I want you to live. I…*

“I’ve been thinking all this time… about the fate brought to me as result of always prioritizing my own benefits.”

——*If possible, I want to prepare an escape route only for you and make you promise not to come back to me ever again. I… understand it perfectly now.*

“You are right. Favoring oneself is wrong. There are other things… that should be prioritized.”

——*I am… a deadly poison for you.*

“I get it, Violet. Let’s do that. However,” Gilbert added, “I won’t let you go alone. We’ll separate into a group for the assault and a group to request reinforcements from Squads 2 and 3. We’ll fire a steel cord into the terrace and have you descend from it as well. Once done, not only you but also everyone else will be able to get inside.”

Violet blinked in surprise at what she was told. It seemed she had not thought about that possibility. “Everyone, I’ll lay out the strategy. Lend me your ears.”

The infiltration began at last. Moving to the building pointed at by Violet was easy. Perhaps due to how terrible the state of the war was, other than those placed in the cathedral, all the soldiers around the town were headed to the gate.

As they arrived at the rooftop, the sky could be seen enclosed by a rusted steel net. They removed only the parts that would be an obstruction to the passage, making it easier for Violet to run. They then fixated the iron cord

to the ground at the approach run's distance point. All left to do was for her to make the way.

"I will be… the first in line. You all can follow down in order."

Everyone took a part of the iron mesh net that was cut into smaller pieces. They would use it to hang onto the iron cord and slide downwards.

"Here I go!" Violet started running with a shout.

The troops of the troopers left behind set their guns and shot the cathedral's stained glass right before their eyes. Sounds of fragmenting glass echoed as its richly colored pieces rained onto the earth. And Violet leaped. Like a bird, like a deer.

The voices of the enemy soldiers could be heard from downstairs. It seemed they had been noticed.

Making sure that the iron cord attached to Violet's body was tight enough, Gilbert descended vigorously. As he hit the wall and somehow managed to climb upwards, Violet immediately offered her hand. She stood firm on her feet and endured the weight her other comrades coming down the iron cord.

"Violet. Are you all right?"

Upon being asked so, she suddenly fell down on the spot. The steel cord was being shot by enemy firearms. The soldiers on the way fell to the ground and died. Gilbert signaled to the companions left on the roof, "please call for support" solely with his hands. In the end, only two people had succeeded in the infiltration, but Gilbert had somewhat felt that such turn of events was meant to be.

"Violet, are you listening?"

"Yes, Major."

She looked abysmal. Her white cheeks had scratches from the pieces of stained glass. Her battle clothes were torn apart. She was covered with the smell of smoke, wet with the blood of enemy soldiers, and her breathing was disturbed, as if her physical strength was at its limit.

"It's just the two of us. We might be killed."

"Yes."

Gilbert's shoulders also heaved from fatigue. "But this is an order: no matter what, don't die."

"Yes, I will definitely live and protect you, Major."

"Good girl."

——*You've really… become able to speak so well. You've grown up. You are… not a 'thing'.*

"But that's my line."

The room they had sneaked in from was about five stories beneath the rooftop. Musical instruments and bronze statues were kept in it. It was likely a mere antic.

Outside of the room was a spiral stairway that led to the terrace. The two looked out the windows as they went up, observing as the ground appeared to be so far below. A tall cloud of smoke rose from the gates. Gilbert anxiously wondered if Hodgins was still alive.

“Major, we’ll soon reach the top floor.” Violet grabbed once again onto her unraveling battle-axe.

Soldiers who had been on standby heard their footsteps, drawing their sabers and descending to attack them. Simultaneously, other soldiers roared as they ran up the stairs.

“Major!” Violet turned backwards after mowing the soldiers that had attempted to charge at her with their blades.

Gilbert drew out his own sword and stood on the way to the lower stories. “Go, Violet. While I keep them busy, kill the ones above and fire the signal flare. With just that… it will be the same as a victory declaration upon this battle. Even if we’re inferior in number, the odds are in our favor.”

Despite never having hesitated when making cruel choices, Violet wavered. If all the soldiers from the inferior floors were coming up, she could hardly imagine Gilbert having a chance on his own.

“Allow me to fight back too, Major!”

“It’s an order! Go!”

“But I—”

“I said it’s an order! Go, Violet!”

As she was barked at, Violet’s body moved on automatic halfway through. She went up the stairs without being able to reply, kicked out the door to the top floor in which the figures of the gods were drawn and went outside.

As she did so, before her line of sight was a scene so beautiful it could make one regret laying their eyes upon it in such a situation. A gently murmuring petite fountain. Flower beds growing greenery and blossoms. Their sweet, pure aroma mixed with the stench of smoke.

The terrace of the cathedral was a garden in the sky. For a moment, Violet was shocked at the excessive absence of reality.

“It’s the enemy! Kill her!”

There were four soldiers. They were long-range shooters and observers. How many of her comrades had been killed by them as they tried to invade the cathedral? They were at a great shooting spot.

Screams and gunshots echoed from downstairs. The sound of Violet’s heartbeats sharply increased.

“Move…” She swung the battle-axe, the blood of those she had killed splattered around the place as she glared at the enemies in front of her with a beastly look. “Move, move, move, move, move!”

She was only concerned about the sounds behind her.

“Move, move, move, move, move, move, move, moveeeeeeeeee!” Violet jumped widely towards the soldiers. She slashed the arms and legs of three of them, shredding them to death.

“Move, move, move, move, move, move!”

The feeling of impatience dulled Violet’s ability to handle weapons. A bullet grazed her belly and dented the flesh of her arm. It was a gaffe she would usually not commit. Her vision blurred with the pain.

Gilbert was defending her from below. She had to return as soon as possible and give him aid.

“Moveeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

She slew the neck of the last man. Her legs naturally fell to the ground due to the pain of the shot. Standing back up, she fired the signal flare that had been wrapped in her gun holder towards the sky. White brightness scattered in the air. It was like a flower of light.

She would not let things end with just one shot. She would triturate all the remaining debris.

The last signal flare made a flashy sound. Immediately after said sound, Violet collapsed headfirst.

“Ah… Augh… ugh…” The next sound she heard was not from the signal flare she had just fired. Curt yelps leaked at the overwhelming circumstances. Her right shoulder had been shot at close range, which had opened a big hole in it. Her face was immersed a pool of her own blood.

Violet heard the sound of a gun being loaded behind her. She instantly took out her own gun with her left hand and fired a shot while turning around. She killed a soldier holding a large rifle who had failed to shoot her in the brain.

She could not breathe properly. The shoulder of her dominant hand only hung floppily. The senses of her right hand were faint.

“Uh… Augh… uugh…”

She was not supposed to stand up. The more she moved, the more blood flowed out.

“Major!”

Even so, Violet returned from where she had come. The sole reason she could move her body in spite of the serious injuries was her obsession with her one and only Lord. She left a trail of red as she walked.

“Major, Major! Major!” she called several times, seeking Gilbert. Dodging the corpses of the soldiers she had killed at the penultimate floor, she

searched about, wondering if he was there. “Major!” Violet screamed, sounding like breaking glass.

Gilbert lay in the middle of the stairs, about to be stabbed to death by an enemy soldier’s bayonet. The enemy’s hands derailed at Violet’s voice, but the bayonet’s tip pierced into Gilbert’s face.

“Yo… YOU BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARD!” She threw the battle-axe I with one hand and cut the enemy’s torso. He collapsed. Violent also fell down with the momentum. She then crawled towards Gilbert. “Major, Major, Major!”

One of Gilbert’s eyes had been gouged and he bore severe wounds. He would no longer be able to see light or colors with it. He looked inexpressibly like a dead body that could not speak but still breathed. However, his breathing was critically shallow. His hand and legs were bloody with bullet and sword scratches.

Would it be quicker to die from profuse bleeding or from being killed by enemy soldiers coming from downstairs? Either way, the brilliance of life was on the verge of disappearing for him.

“Major, Major!” raising her tone, Violet leaned her superior onto her shoulders, but he did not answer. She forced her dangling hands to carry him on her back. “Uugh… ah… uuugh… ah…”

Her dominant arm could not withstand it and she succumbed. She rolled down a few steps, stood up once more and stretched a hand out towards Gilbert. As she had used up too much strength, her arms sagged from her shoulders. Her dominant one was unlikely to be able to wield weapons.

Violet did not even cogitate discarding either Gilbert or the battle-axe as a choice. She threw the battle-axe away and tried to get down with Gilbert using the arm that still worked. While doing so, a group of armed men rushed in from below.

“UUUUUUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Violet picked up the battle-axe once again and slashed the enemies with one hand. She mercilessly struck the counterweight chain towards those who tried to make their way through and cracked their skulls with its tip.

She then repeated her previous actions. Still trying to carry Gilbert, enemies would continue to come from downstairs. She would kill them. More would appear. She could not move forward. It suffers seriously, it is a consumable battle over it.

“Di… DIEEEEE!”

Ultimately, Violet wound up allowing a lone young soldier, who shouted as he rushed in, to deliver a blow. Her scream was not audible. His saber gnawed through the base of her other arm.

It was an enemy with no fighting skills. In normal conditions, he would probably be but a young boy who had no connection with warfare and did not need to wield a sword.

Dropping the weapon he had stabbed her with and standing up, the soldier yelled. He eyed her from a short distance, shrinking back upon realizing the one he was supposed to eliminate was a young girl.

“You can…” blood dripped from her lips, “kill me… so please… don’t kill… Major.” Violet begged for Gilbert’s life. The flabbergasted soldier was reflected in her beautiful blue eyes, but she could not see him properly due to blood and sweat trailing down from her head. She could not discern what expression he was making.

“I’m… I’m sorry… I didn’t mean it… I…” the soldier’s voice cracked.

“I didn’t mean it! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it!”

“Plea… se.”

“That’s not it! This…! I didn’t mean this!” the soldier shrieked as he fled.

For safety, Violet watched him retreat before returning to Gilbert’s side. “Major…” Her feet were unstable, perhaps because she was about to lose

consciousness. “I… did it, Major… Major…”

“Violet…” Gilbert, who had been with his eyes closed the whole time, barely opened one of them as he spoke.

Hearing her name be called, Violet responded with a tearful voice, “Major…”

It was a tone that he had not heard from her until now. Her earlier demon god-like aura had disappeared and her face was that of a scared child curled up in a corner of the battlefield.

“Violet… what is happening… right now? Where… are we?”

Violet replied to Gilbert’s question with a congested voice, “This… this is still the cathedral. We have accomplished our mission. Now we just have to wait for reinforcements so we can flee from here, but they have not arrived yet. The enemies are coming from downstairs. There is no end to them. Major, please give directions. Please give me an order.”

“Run… away.”

“How am I supposed to run… while taking Major with me?”

“Leave me… here… and escape.”

Unable to understand what she had been told at first, Violet was in doubt as how to answer. “Are you telling me to… abandon you?” she shook her head in refusal. “I cannot do that! Major… I am bringing you along.”

“I’m fine. If you leave me here and go… you should… still… have a chance to survive. Please escape, Violet.”

A loud explosion could be heard in the distance. Only the place the two of them found themselves in was quiet, as if it were a different dimension.

“I will not run away, Major! If Major is staying, then I will fight here! If I am supposed to escape, I will take Major with me!” she shouted while

using both of her arms, bleeding and cramping, to hold onto the collar of his battle uniform and drag him.

“Violet, stop it…”

He could hear the sounds of blood vessels bursting. She was probably in tremendous pain as her flesh tore apart.

“Violet!”

Her dominant arm, which had been only hanging flaccidly, fell to the ground. Without even looking at it, she continued to pull Gilbert with her other arm.

“Stop… stop it… stop, Violet…”

Violet did not listen to the order. Her breaths came out as wheezes and, putting her remaining strength on the arm that had been stabbed by a bayonet, she went down one step at a time. The more she moved, the more the blade cut into her flesh.

“Violet!”

Her only arm left betrayed her and fell apart as well. Violet then returned to her previous position. Like a bird which feathers had been pulled off, her arms bled abundantly. As per her own habit, she moved her neck left and right to confirm the situation and felt like smiling dimly.

“Major, I will save you now.”

Even so, while biting her lips tightly, she resumed climbing the stairs using only her knees. Yet her body had lost its balance without her arms. She slipped onto the steps many times and rolled down the stairs. She would fall and get up, fall and get up. Worrying only about Gilbert, she turned the stairway into a sea of blood.

Although she was not in his field of vision, once Gilbert realized she had lost her arms for his sake, tears started pouring from his eye. “Stop it…” his pleading voice echoed ruefully, “Just stop it, Violet!”

“I don’t want to.” Again, she declined immediately. “Major… just… just… a little more…”

“It’s enough. It’s enough already… your arms… your arms have…”

“The enemy soldiers are not coming. Most likely… reinforcements have arrived downstairs. I can hear… the sounds.”

“Then you go downstairs first! That’s right, it’s better like this. Call the reinforcements. Go, I’m fine!”

“I don’t want to! If… If Major dies while I’m not around, what am I supposed to do?”

“If that happens, it will be over for me. It’s all right, just go down!”

“I don’t want to! No matter what… I don’t want to! If I leave Major here… and by the time I come back…”

“It’s fine if I die. It’s fine as long as you live!”

“I cannot obey this order!”

Crouching down, Violet continued attempting to pull Gilbert. She had no arms anymore, and therefore could not carry him. She could barely walk using her joints, but not take him with her.

“No matter what… no matter what… I will not let Major die.” Violet’s teeth dug into Gilbert’s shoulder. It was like a dog carrying something in its mouth. “U… Uuuuuuh!” Her voice leaked out agonizingly. Her frame trembled as she repeatedly attempted to pull him. However, with wounds as grave as hers and a body that was not of a dog, but of a human, there was no way she would succeed. “Ma… jor…”

“Violet, stop it… ve you…” Gilbert choked, “ove you… I… love you!” He shouted, vision blurred by overflowing tears, “I love you! I don’t want to let you die! Violet! Live!!”

It was the first time he had ever said it to her. He had not said “I love you” until now. There had been plenty of opportunities, but he had remained silent. “I love you, Violet.” Always, always, always, it was what his heart had whispered. Even so, he had not said it aloud even once.

When had that feeling been born? He had no idea what the trigger had been. If he were ever asked what he fond of about her, he would not be able to put it in words.

“Violet…”

“Major.” Before he realized it, he was happy whenever she called out to him. He believed he had to protect her as she followed him from behind. His chest pounded with immutable devotion.

“Violet, are you listening?”

It did not take long for him to return the burning gaze she would stare at him with. Using her as a weapon had pained him, and throwing her life away became his greatest fear.

“I like you.”

——I… want to stop asking God what is right and what is wrong. If saying this is a sin, I want to settle all my accounts in death.

“I love you.”

She was the first person that Gilbert Bougainvillea had truly loved.

“I love you, Violet.”

“Lo… ve…” blood still pouring down from her arms, Violet pronounced the word as if hearing it for the very first time. She dragged her body to Gilbert’s side, flopping down next to him and peeking at his face. “What is… ‘love’?” she sounded sincerely confused. Her tears fell from above, wetting Gilbert’s cheeks. “What is… ‘love’? What is… ‘love’? What is ‘love’?”

Her messy crying face was something he had not seen even when she was a child. She would not cry as she killed people, or as she was lonely from not being loved by anyone. She was a girl who had never cried before.

“I do not understand, Major…”

That same girl was now weeping.

“What is love?” It was a genuine question.

——*Ah, that’s right.*

Gilbert’s heart hurt much more than his body. She did not know. There was no way she could. After all, he had not told her. He had not ‘taught’ her about it.

——*She doesn’t know… love.* At that, Gilbert once again shed large tears. *What a… fool I am.*

Not being able to express his feelings to his loved one was the result of himself neglecting love. Was there a more disgraceful way to die?

“Violet.”

Nevertheless, his heart was strangely peaceful. He had a hunch that the pain in his body was gradually subsiding. It was a peculiar feeling. The fact that he was finally able to muster out his most honest sentiments was probably the cause of it. He somehow felt that everything had been forgiven.

“Violet… love… is…” Gilbert said to the girl that he loved the most in his whole life, “to love is… to think that you… want to protect someone the most in the world.” He whispered gently, almost as though lecturing her, as if she were still the small child of when they had first met, “You’re important… and precious. I don’t ever want you to be hurt. I want you to be happy. I want you to be well. That’s why, Violet, you should live on and become free. Escape from the military and live your life. You’ll be fine

even if I’m not around. Violet, I love you. Please live.” Gilbert repeated, “Violet, I love you.”

After the declaration, the only thing that could be heard were the cries of the one in the receiving end. “I do not understand… I do not understand…” she complained through her sobs, “I do not understand… I do not understand love. I do not understand… the things Major talks about. If this is how it is, for what reason have I been fighting? Why did you give me orders? I am… a tool. Nothing else. Your tool. I do not understand love… I just… want to save… you, Major. Please do not leave me on my own. Major, please do not leave me on my own. Please give me an order! Even if it costs my life… please order me to save you!”

The child that primarily could not listen to anything other than ‘kill’ was wailing for him to make her help him. In place of reaching his hand out to embrace her, Gilbert could only mutter one sentence as his consciousness faded, “I love you.” He could then hear noises of someone coming from downstairs, but was no longer even able to keep his eye open.

The records of the girl soldier named Violet ended there.

Afterword

Dear whomever it may concern, it is a pleasure to meet you. Are you doing well? I am the same as always.

I had spent a long time thinking of living by myself, and therefore started writing novels. For about three years, I'd been to Hokkaidou's Jinguu Shrine and prayed to the ancestors, "if I am able to become a novelist, I do not mind if I am never again loved by anyone from here on" as a form of equivalent exchange. Somehow, I wanted for myself something certain, unyielding, to that extent.

I continued to do this, and on the first days of the third year, during Hatsumoude, the fortune slip I took was one of 'great luck'. Its contents

filled my body with a sense akin to a déjà-vu. “For some reason… I feel I will get an award this year,” is what I remember saying back then. A few months later, I received a prestigious first prize from Kyoto Animation. “Finally, I have sold my soul,” I had said as I moored under the weight of an equivalent exchange, but upon standing still for once after only running forward and looking back on everything that happened until that point, I realized this was not really the case.

Violet Evergarden bestowed several forms of ‘love’ onto the hands of someone like me, who had thought that I should live alone and did not need any of it. There were also many people who helped me out miraculously on the way to publication. I then became helplessly ashamed of my previous resolve.

Basically, I had been an idiotic fool.

I fail and cry often. I had thought I would wail less once I grew up, yet I only became even more of a crybaby. The only difference in the way I cry now from how I used to cry as a child is that my current self wipes the mud off her knees on her own, stands on her feet again with a tearstained face and resumes running at full speed, using her suffering as fuel. The fact I did not slow down, the fact I took notice of the people who were watching over me as I ran on and remembered to show them my gratitude… everything I felt was poured into Violet Evergarden. It’s not a very happy story, because life is hard.

I don’t want tomorrow to come. Still, in this cruel word, I am moved to tears whenever occasional moments of wonder happen. I believe that’s beautiful. If a story like that was ever allowed, I wanted to write more of it. If there is anyone who has read up to this point that does not wish for tomorrow to come, please don’t give in. I’m cheering for you. I also really want to be cheered on, so let’s both make things work out somehow and do our best.

Now then, may everyone who found this relatable have wonderful moments as well. Best regards.